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Study Abroad Program Administration: An Approach to Setting Up a Nursing and English Study Abroad Program



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Individual educators or committees of educators are often responsible for designing and managing study abroad programs despite this being outside their training or experience. Leaving this task to non-specialists risks them being unaware of best practices to ensure high quality program design and management. This personal narrative introduces an approach based on market research methodology and benchmarking the author used to compensate for his lack of specialist skills.

How do nursing programs "do" study abroad? This was the question I asked myself as I was tasked with creating my nursing university's first annual study abroad program. I joined the faculty at Fukuoka Jo Gakuin Nursing University, a Christian women's university established in 2008 comprising a single nursing faculty of 400 students, in 2015. Soon after, I was placed on a newly established international exchange committee and asked to create a study abroad program for our first- and second-year students.

Although I had been involved with study abroad programs at other Japanese universities, those were multi-faculty universities, often maintaining decades-long relationships with multiple partner universities and supported by dedicated administrative staff. When working on those programs, I encountered operational challenges – communicating our needs with the host university, promoting the program to our students and parents, recruiting and preparing participants, and ensuring program quality and participant satisfaction. Eventually, my new program would also be facing these challenges, but first I needed to submit a program proposal to the international exchange committee.

An essential step in creating a proposal for a new program is to identify stakeholders and investigate their needs and expectations for the program. Doing so will expose a range of issues from administrators, teachers, students, and parents, including chaperoning, risk management, recognizing and granting credit, program goals and objectives, pre-departure orientations, post-return projects, and overall cost performance. Then, program designers can select programming characteristics that respond to these needs and expectations.

I addressed student needs by surveying the current first and second-year cohorts using a market research survey I had designed for my previous university where the number of recruits for a longstanding program had been declining. That survey

explored three topics: students' current interest in study abroad, awareness and interest in university and non-university programs, and study abroad preferences. The responses provided insights into program characteristics such as price points, length, group tours, and accommodation (Porter, 2015). By eliminating items related to existing programs, the survey became an appropriate tool to gather data from current students. Meanwhile, the needs and expectations of our new international exchange committee, which consisted of university administrators and professors, became clear through discussions at committee meetings. These mainly focused on safety, risk management, alleviating parental anxiety, and program objectives.

While gathering data and feedback from stakeholders, I also set out to identify exceptional approaches to study abroad developed within comparable nursing programs – a targeted benchmark that we could use to develop and later evaluate our program. I started by examining nursing program websites to see what other universities were doing. However, unlike the websites of liberal arts programs, the international activities sections on nursing program websites, if they existed, often lacked detailed program descriptions, suggesting study abroad is not a priority. Having little success identifying the exceptional, I changed my approach to identifying the average with the aim of constructing a baseline program so that our university could at least offer a

program similar to ones offered within other nursing programs.

In order to create this baseline program, I chose five universities based on their student capacity, years in operation, selectivity, location, and number of faculties, and was able to identify four approaches to study abroad based on the programs they offered: English-speaking destination, non-English-speaking destination, field work, and domestic programs, with a variety of attributes including program length and inclusion of visits to health care facilities (Porter, 2017). I then surveyed the incoming first-year cohort to measure which programs were most attractive and realistic to them. With this data, I was able to propose short-, mid-, and long-term goals for international exchange activities to the committee, resulting in the creation of an affordable two-week program in March at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia, focusing on nursing English and including site visits to medical facilities. Students would stay with host families and would be accompanied by a bilingual chaperone.

Once the initial group returned, I gathered anonymous feedback from the twenty participants and had discussions with administrators, teachers, and parents. To alleviate the anxiety of administrators and parents, I constructed a private Google Site with a map of key locations in Brisbane, a calendar of events, and a daily slide show comprising one slide created by each student, who would upload their best picture from the day and write a short

bilingual description. This proved instrumental in satisfying parents and administrators. Students expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the overall program, but pointed out three areas in need of improvement – preparation, facility visits, and curriculum, areas that will be addressed in the next iteration of the program.

My goal in sharing this experience is to promote administrative decision-making based on data collection to both novice and experienced administrator-educators. Market research is concerned with defining and understanding your market and developing a service (or product) that meets the needs for that market. It calls for a systematic and objective approach to data collection as well as the creation of actionable items based on an analysis of the data. Benchmarking also results in the creation of actionable items based on data gathered through comparisons of your school's programs, services, and processes with established benchmarks or through the process of working with others in your field to create new benchmarks. I would like to suggest that educators working in nursing programs actively share not only the kinds of study abroad programs we offer to nursing students but also work towards identifying best practices in all aspects of program administration.

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