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Sweden in the Summer: Developing an Honors Study-Abroad Program

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I want to begin this paper by making a claim with which, at first, not everyone might agree. Any *good* study abroad experience can be considered an honors experience. This short sentence raises any number of questions, which I cannot fully answer in this space, nor is it the primary topic of my essay. It is, however, a way to contextualize our one-month honors study abroad program at University of Missouri-Kansas City.

STUDY ABROAD = HONORS?

First, what do I mean by a “good” study abroad experience? “Good” implies that its structure and content allow the student participant to achieve what most of us would agree are the main reasons to study abroad—an expanded vision of the global community and the United States’ (sometimes deleterious) role in that community, a more profound understanding of the target culture, a greater sense of individual responsibility and self-reliance, and the realization that a college education in general is a precious commodity that should be mined for all its possibilities. In a 2002 article in the *National Honors Report*, Mel Shoemaker, though writing about honors programs, outlines goals that are also praiseworthy for study abroad programs: “The challenge is to [. . .] create conscientious consumers of commodities, critical evaluators of local, national and world media, and compassionate global citizens who ask questions beyond those of individual and national self-interest of the present” (6). These are goals that we hope to impart to honors students throughout their undergraduate careers; study abroad is perhaps the most direct way to teach them and is thus an important component in an honors student’s education.

In creating UMKC’s honors study abroad program, I was already quite aware of the positive results engendered by study abroad because I have directed our non-honors summer program in Lyon, France, for four summers. I have seen first-hand the self-reliance and confidence a homestay-based program can impart to a student, and I have witnessed the exciting projects students present after doing research in a European archive (in the case of Lyon, at the Centre d’Histoire de la Résistance et de la Déportation). What I was less aware of was honors pedagogy and what makes an honors course different from a regular

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course. I should add that I became director of the 120-student UMKC Honors Program in 2003 and that same year began to lay the groundwork for our study abroad program; thus, much of what I learned about honors occurred in the trenches while I was launching a host of new initiatives.

Honors administrators and faculty constantly define and redefine what honors courses are. I tell my students that honors courses are not necessarily more work, and they are not necessarily harder, but they are more suited to the way that honors students (often known as gifted or accelerated students earlier in their academic careers) learn. These courses should be smaller than regular courses, be based on discussion (not lecture), include more primary sources and student-centered discovery (meaning that students should be allowed to make connections, discover new ideas, and explore the texts on their own as opposed to having the instructor proffer his or her own readings), stress writing and oral presentations, and, I would add, generally be more lively, a bit more out-of-control than a regular class. I like the image of controlled chaos—many diverse voices arguing, agreeing, and creating together and individually.

NUTS AND BOLTS OF HONORS STUDY ABROAD

When I began to envision an honors study abroad program, I quickly realized that the model I was accustomed to, the language-immersion experience, did not apply in this case. In order to make this program feasible for the widest population of honors students, it could not be a foreign-language based program. Furthermore, UMKC students in general have not had the opportunity to travel much outside the Midwest, let alone beyond the U.S., and thus we needed to plan a program that felt manageable for our students. I assembled a subcommittee to help me design the program, and the honors students in the group felt strongly that the program needed to take place in a country where English was spoken widely. After much discussion, we found ourselves hesitating between South Africa and Sweden. I wanted the former, but the other committee members felt that it would be too difficult a place for our students to travel to—in terms of both culture and cost. We decided that we needed to create a program that would serve as a jumping-off point for our students' study abroad experiences. Ideally an honors student would participate in our Sweden Study Abroad program the summer after his or her first year at UMKC and would, as a result, the next year try a language-immersion program or spend a semester or a year in a non-European country. Sweden fit the bill perfectly as an "introduction to study abroad" of sorts.

The final reason we chose Uppsala, Sweden, was that one of the members of the committee is a native and was able to help us negotiate some of the initial hurdles. These days it is becoming easier to set up a study abroad program without first engaging in a fact-finding mission to the country. Dr. Lynda Payne, the faculty member who leads the program to Sweden, designed the day-to-day schedules using resources she found on the Internet and in travel guides. She put together her entire budget, planned the excursions (trips to museums, a day

in Stockholm, a weekend in the Värmland), and found important information for the students (bus schedules and fares from the airport to Uppsala, for example) without leaving Kansas City. This said, however, a preparatory trip to Sweden was necessary to find housing for the students. Although even this might have been possible to find over the Internet, I felt it necessary that someone actually visit the hostel we were considering, and this is where Dr. Bibie Chronwall, our native-informant, came in. Like many honors programs, we had no money to spend setting up the Sweden program. However, we were lucky that Bibie was going to Sweden the summer before our inaugural trip, and she gamely agreed to find housing for the students. In the end, the first hostel she looked at fit our needs precisely: small, single rooms with kitchenettes rented on a monthly basis and meeting rooms on the first floor that we could use as classrooms. So, my first bit of advice for setting up an honors study abroad program would be to find some gentle soul who will do a bit of the target-country legwork. Preferably the director of the program should go to the country to find the housing and classroom space, but, if this is not economically possible, with some preparation beforehand (e.g., addresses to be visited, a list of questions to be asked) a kindly volunteer can help out. Of course, ideally, the kindly volunteer will be a native of the country as well. No matter how similar the target country's culture is to our own, there are always forms of decorum and other customs that escape our notice and that, when understood, make the task much more enjoyable.

Once we had our student housing (I found the director's lodgings on-line with the help of someone at Uppsala University), we put together our budget. We used the program fee to pay for the director's housing and food while the students' tuition offset the cost of her summer salary. Students were asked to find their own flights as no one wanted to leave on the same day and they all had different ways of getting to Sweden. We did have a few pre-departure meetings, months in advance, for students to arrange to travel there together if they so desired.

The first problem we encountered was one we had foreseen and tried to forestall. Because of the demanding set of general education requirements at UMKC, our students tend not to take courses that do not fulfill either major or general requirements (if they come in with no AP or other college credit, students must take 66 units of general education courses!). We had to devise a way that the six units of coursework completed in Sweden would fulfill basic curricular requirements, which we did by shaping the syllabi of the classes to fulfill related requirements. The courses highlighted interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives, two of our general education requirements. Although this strategy might seem obvious for teaching about a foreign culture, it had to be worked into the syllabi from the beginning in order to fulfill these requirements.

On our campus it is difficult to attract students to a new study abroad program. We offer very few scholarships for study abroad, and, as I have noted earlier, our students tend to remain in the Midwest. Furthermore, 90% of UMKC's students are commuters, and over the summer many work. That first summer

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(July 2006), only two of 120 honors students chose to participate in the program, so we opened it up to both honors students outside of UMKC (I advertised on the National Collegiate Honors Council website—two students joined us from the website announcement) and non-honors students at UMKC (six more students enrolled for a total of 10). We decided that we wouldn't change the classes at all. The non-honors students would simply benefit from the classes as designed, and this proved to be no problem. We also targeted our recruiting efforts at student populations that seemed most likely to be able to take advantage of the program, such as the UMKC six-year medical school program. The students in this program were more likely to be able to afford the program, and the study abroad director, Dr. Payne, is an historian of medicine and gender (with a Master's in Scandinavian Studies); thus her perspective on Carl Linnaeus (the Swedish botanist who established the system of binomial nomenclature) and the National Romantics interested medical students. Recruitment for the next year (July 2007 was our second summer in Uppsala) was much easier. We asked students who had already participated in the program to speak to prospective participants, and obviously their efforts helped recruitment. We organized a number of information sessions where they could share their experiences and display their projects. In the end, thirteen students traveled to Sweden in the 2007 program.

One Sweden-specific issue that has come up and that is not necessarily correlated to honors is marketing. Language-based study abroad programs have a built-in audience. "Exotic" countries from the American perspective, nations in Africa or Asia, also tend to sell themselves. Places like Scandinavian countries, however, are often seen as dull or too familiar. The stereotype of Sweden is that it is a clean, homogeneous country with a culture very similar to America's. The students who went on the program, however, returned with a completely different view of Sweden. They learned about the Laplanders and their non-Western culture and way of life. They read about the offensive national eugenics program that stretched from 1905 through 1945. They researched Sweden's "neutrality" (or lack thereof) during WWII. And they attended festivals and visited neighborhoods that proved to them that Sweden is in no way a racially or culturally homogeneous nation. These sides of Sweden do not generate the stereotypes with which our students are familiar, and they are important facets of Swedish culture.

BUREAUCRATIC ISSUES

The major problem we have had to face in establishing this program has been institutional, quite specific to UMKC. We cannot seem to get the payment, enrollment, and reimbursement issues ironed out. These problems stem from UMKC's rather small Center for International Academic Programs. We do not have many customized study abroad programs; each department or unit has traditionally run its own program. So, my home department, Foreign Languages and Literatures, has been running our programs in Lyon, Xalapa, Grenada,

Buenos Aires, and Klagenfurt on our own. We take the students' money, we enroll them for classes, we (or, I should specify, our amazing secretary) collect receipts, and we reimburse the directors of the programs. The same goes for the programs in the Business School, the School of Nursing, etc. CIAP helps with publicity and preparing the students, but each department handles its own grunt work. For a program like Honors Study Abroad, there is no department to take care of these matters. In principle our International Programs office should do this, but it is not set up to handle all the money and enrollment issues. So we muddle through. At the moment our Continuing Education program is manhandling the money and enrollment matters, and we hope that in the future we will find a bureaucratic home for the program.

HONORS CLASSES AT HOME AND ABROAD

I would like to return to the issue of honors pedagogy and in what ways the courses taught in Sweden are honors classes. Obviously, as she designed the curriculum, Dr. Payne wanted to take full advantage of Uppsala. Thus, although each morning the students are in a classroom discussing the texts they have read (these are generally primary texts—essays by Linnaeus, a novel by Selma Lagerlöf, *April Witch* by Majgull Axelsson, excerpts from the classic anthropological text *Culture Builders* by Frykman and Löfgren), each afternoon they take an excursion. Sometimes they explore the urban space, in the classic City as Text™ model, discussing the symbolic meaning for Swedes of the site in question. On other days they are in museums, exploring palaces, or visiting libraries. From the outset each student chooses a research topic and develops a project in order to report the findings of that research. Although some students' research topics relate directly to their major (for example, a public policy student designed an evaluation to assess how the Sweden program fulfilled the students' expectations, curricular needs, etc.), others choose projects that allow them to broaden their creative horizons. One political science student chose to assemble a scrapbook reflecting her perspective on the history of Uppsala. A Conservatory of Music honors student painted a series of landscapes and then wrote an analysis of the ways Nordic painters use light. A medical student mapped out and evaluated Linnaeus' garden and then transposed it to the Midwest, substituting the appropriate plants from the different climate zone. This summer an honors student in Spanish interviewed Spanish teachers in Uppsala to ascertain how foreign-language pedagogy in Sweden differs from that in the U.S. The resulting project may be very creative in form or more traditional. In either case, at the end of the month the students gather at Gamla Uppsala, the ancient settlement of Uppsala, and present their projects to the class as a whole.

The honors characteristic of these classes derives from the combination of primary texts, research (in a few cases archival, although in some projects the research involves interviewing Swedes), creative or scholarly projects, and oral presentations. But the honors quality also stems from the specificity of the study abroad experience. Directors of honors programs strive to imbue in their students

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the desire to be intellectuals. We model this behavior, but we also try to make it a natural outcome of the classes we teach and the extracurricular activities we program for the students. In our Honors Living/Learning Community we have movie nights where faculty members lead discussions of the films; we organize debates around philosophical or political topics; we have a book club and go to the theater together. All these events encourage intellectualism. Even if the event is purely social—a touch football game on the dorm lawn—I hope that at some point a few students might get a “kick” out of analyzing the ritualistic elements of the game.

Simply by having the courses take place in Sweden, the students make links between their classes and the lives they are leading outside the classroom. Dr. Payne told me of the animated discussion that ensued at lunch one day when the students observed the Swedish obsession with fleeing the city during the summer (they were surprised by the number of families who leave town to spend time in their tiny, very primitive summer homes, communing with nature) through the lens of their readings by Linnaeus. She explained that other lunchtime discussions ranged from the extensive child protection laws—corporal punishment is illegal—to the Swedes’ seemingly complete lack of interest in religion or the pros and cons of the Swedish welfare state. This kind of moment is what we as honors directors strive to create in our home-institution classes and residence-hall activities; the discussion is completely impromptu in a study abroad program. There is no need for programming, planning, designing. The students make the links quite naturally, perhaps because not only are the texts and information new to them but also the environment, culture, and people. All of this newness begs to be analyzed, thought about, and discussed. The students pick up the baton and run, on their own, out of sheer curiosity and excitement.

So, through a long, rather discursive exercise, I’ve circled back to my original premise, that a *good* study abroad experience can be considered an honors experience. I think that our Honors Study Abroad in Uppsala, Sweden is really quite wonderful, thanks in full to the gifted faculty members who have helped organize and lead it. In a perfect world, all honors students (okay, all students) need to study abroad.

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