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## Faculty-Led International Honors Programs

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# Faculty-Led International Honors Programs

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We know that one of the major reasons for encouraging our students to study outside of the United States is to broaden their knowledge and understanding of the world. The insights and personal experiences that students gain from living, speaking, and taking part in the culture they are studying are immeasurable. Students also improve their professional potential. An international study program can provide students with cognitive and affective competencies necessary for them to thrive in a global economy, and it can provide the nation with citizens who are economically and politically savvy. Substantive research demonstrates some of the core values and skills of a liberal arts education that are enhanced, including critical thinking skills, the ability to communicate in more than one language, the ability to communicate across cultural and national boundaries, and the ability to make informed judgments on major personal and social issues.

Although much can be gained from any experience of studying in another country, a program that is created and run by honors faculty is better. Honors international programs that have been designed and led by honors faculty tend to be customized both to the students and to the honors program, assuring that field pedagogy will replicate the standards and quality that students can expect in their home classes, seminars, and colloquia. Such programs are well-organized since they have to be arranged and approved well in advance. Furthermore, since the faculty members are aware of resources on campus or can propose and receive grants for international programs, the opportunities for students who cannot afford the expense of studying abroad are greater. For example, an honors faculty member at the University of New Mexico received a National Science Foundation grant for our Honors Biodiversity Program in Australia that allowed her to include qualified students regardless of their economic status.

Equally important are the design and execution that can often only be organized by faculty members from the home campus. Faculty-led international programs are designed with awareness of the important components for encountering or engaging with a site:

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The component parts exist in time-space. Organizing them presupposes pace, rhythm, and movement through them. Unlike the presuppositions of campus organization, which (however inaccurately) assumes static structures and immovable objects, every [honors international program] begins with the concept of motion and the dynamic of movement through space over time. [Faculty] construct unique calendars, juxtapose field explorations and classroom discussion, and create arenas in which differing voices lead discussion throughout a term with variable blocks of time allocated to these activities. Further, participants are invited to see themselves as explorers—that is, to move and simultaneously watch themselves moving through uncharted territory. The mapping they undertake is, therefore, of a space, of themselves moving through that space, of themselves transforming that space into a place that has taken on the tangible familiarity of what they, the [students], have measured by their alert movement through it. (Braid 19)

Faculty-led international programs are characterized by a combination of tight structure and planning on the one hand, and serendipity and engagement with the unexpected on the other. On a trip during a UNM Honors *Conexiones* Program in Mexico, for instance, the students were stuck crossing a river. To their surprise, a group of young Tarahumara Indians rushed to their rescue. The students were thus able to engage with young people from a culture very different than their own, benefitting from an opportunity to break with the routines of ordinary life and cross cultural and linguistic boundaries.

Even when excursions are faculty-led, the process still entails student choice, responsibility, and freedom in the process. The end goal is not just showing students the world, i.e. giving them a guided tour, but also facilitating their own explorations. Faculty members leading international programs are likely to create unique outings and trips within the host country whereas students without faculty leadership are more likely to experience generic “tourist” itineraries when traveling within the host country. With faculty support and advice, students less often find themselves in unfortunate or unsafe situations. In an Honors *Conexiones* Program to Mexico, for example, the students were hiking up Basaceachic Mountain when a nearby lightning strike knocked several students to the ground. Because our own faculty members were on site, they were able to calm the students and ensure that no one was hurt.

Further, honors faculty can act as “culture brokers” by explaining the customs and proprieties of the host country. In a majority of cases, they have

traveled to the country themselves, speak the language, and can therefore arrange excursions that will enrich the students' experience. A student who travels alone to Paris or Mexico City or Hong Kong may or may not immerse him- or herself in that culture and language. Sometimes the student is disoriented and can take several weeks to adjust, losing time for exploration of the country. Attending a foreign university can be beneficial, but sometimes students remain on or near the campus and do not venture too far away. Very often they live in residence halls with other American students, and, although they typically attend classes at a local university where courses may be taught in the language of that country, students often find English-taught courses.

In faculty-led international programs, continuity in the student-teacher relationship begins prior to travel with intense and targeted orientations, continues through the field sessions that allow faculty to closely monitor student growth, and provides for an on-going close relationship between faculty and students. Students attending faculty-led programs integrate their learning and experience more closely into their studies and careers subsequent to the program. Faculty "on the ground" are able to inspire students to undertake research projects and can then provide direction and feedback that guarantees a successful research experience. Such faculty can also assure that students have easy access to mentors who have significant experience on the field site and in the situation so that students can be advised on an on-going basis about safety concerns and particular educational and cultural opportunities that they might otherwise miss.

Culture shock—the struggle to make sense of new information—is emotionally unsettling, and students can have difficulty learning when they feel secluded and alone. By going with a faculty member and other students, they feel supported and typically overcome their fears and insecurities more quickly. Engaging crises with humor and equanimity, the instructors indirectly reassure students without "babying" or coddling them. With an explicit means of addressing culture shock, particularly during orientation sessions, it can become a positive rather than disruptive force in the program.

Faculty-led programs include numerous other benefits: they are less expensive than other international programs since prices can be negotiated for a group instead of for an individual; students do not have to deal with transfer credits since their classes are home-university courses even when taught by foreign professors; and excursions arranged and run by a faculty member provide focus for the international study topic. Having a faculty member on site allows flexibility in dealing with unexpected impediments like bad weather and also with positive opportunities. UNM students experienced such an opportunity while participating in the Honors *Conexiones* Program in Nicaragua last summer. They discovered that there was to be a

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celebration of the forty-first anniversary of the revolution in Managua; this turned into an unexpected but invaluable experience during which students learned about the FSLN (*Frente Sandanista Liberación Nacional*) and how important it was to the people.

Field-based, faculty-led programs also allow effective evaluation and direction of student research. If students are on their own, they cannot get feedback on their worksheets and field notes or directions on how to head back into the field to complete the work. They often return to their home institution without having completed a project or with less than the desirable amount of information or concrete data. Since the faculty member is often in the field as both a faculty member running the class and as a researcher collecting his or her own data, students can model themselves on a professional scholar in the field and learn first-hand how to collect information, make choices, use tools, and conduct themselves as scholars. During the *Conexiones* Program in Nicaragua, for example, two of the UNM honors faculty members have been involved in a long-term study of the festivals dedicated to Santiago (St. James) in Latin America, New Mexico, and Spain. Their comparative study is designed to expose the essential and ephemeral aspects of the celebrations and yield valuable insights into the roles of religion and cultures of the saints in the resistance of colonized people. While in Nicaragua, they discovered that a Santiago fiesta was to be held in the small town of Jinotepe. The faculty engaged the students in their research, which included photographs and interviews and which produced numerous hours of audio documentation. Many of the students took on related projects of their own: some students wanted to understand the procession in which a statue of the saint is carried through the streets to the cathedral; others examined the significance and symbolism of the masks and dress of the celebrants; and others studied the music, a mixture of indigenous instruments and modern hip hop refrains. While doing this research, the students learned about research praxis and at the same time expanded their understanding of Nicaraguan folk culture.

Over the years, nearly all students in the UNM study abroad programs have surpassed both our expectations and their own. A few students always do even more, distinguishing themselves through outstanding achievement in all aspects of the program. Since our international faculty-led programs are academically challenging, students must engage the program of study amid the strains and difficulties of travel, cross-cultural contact, and physical exertion. Having our faculty on site and able to provide support, encouragement, information, and contacts, students have achieved deep, original, and productive connections to different cultures and countries.

Faculty-led programs can also include initiatives that are significant to individual honors programs. For example, the UNM honors international programs always place the students with host families during the field session; the families provide room, board, and additional support, preventing the students from becoming completely dependent on the faculty and expanding their ability to connect with residents from the host country. Also, most of our international programs include a service-learning component. During the Honors *Conexiones* Program in Nicaragua, for example, classes were held at a small school, *Casa Xalteva*, that uses proceeds from teaching Spanish to fund educational programs for local children. Our students tutored the children in English, and they practiced their Spanish with the children. With the help of a faculty member, they also learned bicycle repair terminology in Spanish and repaired the school's bicycles, which were then rented to future students in order to generate additional revenue for the school.

Students who study abroad get a well-rounded education that prepares them for our increasingly global world. In my experience, faculty-led programs provide the best education by linking foreign study to the expectations and curricula of the student's honors program, as only faculty-led international programs can do.

## REFERENCES

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