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Honors Inquiry in Ireland: Developing a Research-Based Study Abroad Experience for Honors Students

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Honors programs and colleges have long placed experiential education at the core of their missions (Braid and Long). As universities have made experiential learning opportunities available to more and more of their students, a question arises about what makes honors experiential learning distinctive (Donahue). In the university-wide honors program at Georgia Southern University, we asked this question about honors study abroad offerings. With a limited staff and budget, we needed a good rationale for the honors program to develop and run a study abroad experience. Such an experience would need to provide experiential learning that would be distinctive in a way or ways constitutive of a true honors experience.

In thinking about how high-value experiential learning could form the core of an honors study abroad program, we returned to foundational literature about basic, essential practices within the experiential learning process: concrete doing and evaluative reflection. We paid particular attention

to Kolb's contention that "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (38). We felt that much study abroad does little more than expose students to pre-rehearsed, often "broad brushstroke" data about the host country. This method of knowledge-sharing probably results from instructor anxiety that students might become overwhelmed if tasked with actual knowledge-creation in an environment already disorienting because foreign.

The mere fact of being abroad with informed professors is frequently seen as a beneficial educational experience. Certainly, the participating student will gain new self-knowledge, such as empirical or tested insights into her tolerance for unfamiliar locales and cultures and for risk-taking. Furthermore, she will learn for the first time established (i.e., old) knowledge about the host country. In addition, though, surely an honors study abroad experience should designedly aspire to Kolb's notion of knowledge-creation. While agreeing that—almost by default—study abroad is an instance of experiential education, we also wanted to guarantee that knowledge-creation would flow from any iterative do-and-reflect learning on the part of our honors students beyond the U.S. We concluded that it might prove efficacious while abroad to engage students in a genuine research project: perhaps a portion of a larger, team-led inquiry with at least some established infrastructural elements. As we will explain later, we identified and realized a "version 1.0" of such an opportunity.

Carolyn Haynes outlines several key components of worthwhile and successful study abroad programs: defining core learning outcomes; incorporating diverse learning opportunities; ensuring broad accessibility; and facilitating meaningful engagement and critical reflection. She also emphasizes that a given program should be congruent with and integrated into its participating students' greater curriculum. The above features are surely desirable in any study abroad program and not just an honors scenario. However, when drilling down into what honors study abroad should be, Haynes's attention to the greater curriculum resonated strongly with us because the Georgia Southern University Honors Program has a signature requirement that each of its students complete a research-based thesis, a bottom line we model by providing many research-focused courses. Our impulse, derived from experiential learning theory, to build research into honors study abroad was bolstered by the fit between that ambition and the fact that undergraduate research is a central, distinctive demand within our honors curriculum.

Study abroad and undergraduate research are two approaches included in George Kuh's list of high-impact educational practices. These pedagogical

strategies provide experiences that engage students in an enriched learning environment. Students who participate in high-impact practices have a variety of desirable outcomes: increased academic engagement; improved critical-thinking and -writing skills; and enhanced retention and graduation rates (Brownwell and Swaner). In a focused study, Hu, Kuh, and Li found that inquiry-based activities have strong, positive effects across most student populations but that their benefits are most pronounced among high-performing students. This conclusion would seem to support an understanding of honors students as an ideal constituency for a study abroad experience built around active undergraduate research.

Ours is by no means the first international honors experience based on or privileging research. As in the undergraduate landscape more broadly, the natural sciences offer ample opportunities for research-based approaches in an international context (McClagherty; Bender, Wright, and Lopatto; Bender). In addition, several studies report on programs designed to allow students to conduct community-based research with a service orientation (Minick and Bocchicchio; Studer; Dean and Jendzurski; Buckner and Holcomb; Folds-Bennett and Twomey).

Folds-Bennett and Twomey describe an honors service-learning trip to Honduras that selected its participants through an application process as opposed to regular course registration. Originating in the College of Charleston Honors College, the program provided an intensive on-campus component prior to a two-week Central American experience. In Honduras, the U.S. students focused on community-based, youth-development projects in conjunction with local non-profit partners. Even though the student work was necessarily contained within a defined timeframe, key development outcomes continued after the formal program ended. While using an explicitly research-based rather than service-based approach, the study abroad program we developed parallels important aspects of the College of Charleston initiative: an application requirement; extended pre-trip academic preparation; cooperation with in-country partners; and ongoing outcomes.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Rather than begin with a blank slate, the honors program took stock of what Georgia Southern University already offered as international relationships in general and study abroad options in particular. We recognized that for five consecutive years the university's Irish Studies unit had been facilitating an undergraduate Summer Semester in Ireland, based over five weeks

at Waterford Institute of Technology, a doctoral-research institution in the historic city of Waterford in southeastern Ireland. We also recognized that the Irish Studies unit had begun building on the U.S.-Ireland networks created through the Summer Semester program to develop one or more joint research endeavors. The first of these endeavors had been articulated: a study called the Wexford-Savannah Axis, centered on the fact that by 1860 Wexford had become the most-represented of Ireland's thirty-two traditional counties among the Irish-born community in Savannah, Georgia.

Formally launched during the spring semester of 2014, the Wexford-Savannah Axis study seeks to explain the connection between the two places and assess its impact across time, not just in Savannah and its hinterland but also in Wexford and southeastern Ireland. In addition to its two higher education partners, the Wexford-Savannah Axis initiative has two other partner entities: the prestigious, Savannah-based Georgia Historical Society, founded in 1839; and the John F. Kennedy Trust, a private foundation dedicated to Wexford heritage. The Trust operates two important visitor sites: the Dunbrody Emigrant Experience, dedicated to emigration primarily to Canada and the U.S. from the inland port of New Ross, County Wexford; and the Kennedy Homestead, an interpretive center at President Kennedy's ancestral home, roughly five miles from New Ross.

The maritime county of Wexford is directly adjacent to Waterford, and students from Wexford make up a large segment of the student body at Waterford Institute of Technology. For its part, the coastal city Savannah is about fifty miles from Georgia Southern University and constitutes the urban area nearest the university with a metropolitan population in excess of 350,000. A significant portion of that population self-identifies as Irish: Savannah's St. Patrick's Day Parade is the second largest in North America, and the city has over a dozen active Irish fraternal organizations.

The Wexford-Savannah Axis research project constitutes a study in regionality for both Waterford Institute of Technology and Georgia Southern University, institutions charged with serving their respective regions. The study spans multiple disciplines, including but not limited to the following: cultural anthropology; the sociology of ethnicity; economic, religious, and political history; and integration and multicultural studies. Apart from their intrinsic value as scholarly knowledge, findings from the study will be used to develop cultural and heritage tourism in—and thus bolster the economies of—both the county of Wexford and the city of Savannah, places dedicated to positioning and branding themselves as cultural centers of excellence. Having

the John F. Kennedy Trust as a formal partner provides a ready but demanding outlet for the dissemination of research findings to a general audience of considerable size.

The honors program found a willing partner in the Center for Irish Research and Teaching at Georgia Southern. This small center had undergone a remaking of its mission—and changed its name—to establish research and student-centeredness as its core emphases. Because its conventional undergraduate study abroad program at Waterford Institute of Technology was thriving, the center had begun to develop student-research opportunities within the greater transatlantic relationship by piloting a few Ireland-based “summer research fellowships” for graduate students, a cooperative endeavor with the Georgia Southern College of Graduate Studies. The additional opportunity to incorporate undergraduate honors students into the nascent Wexford-Savannah Axis research project was timely. A small but important matter was to label the endeavor in a way that signaled its aims clearly, both to potential student participants and to our administration. Rather than an amorphous phrase such as “Honors Study Abroad in Ireland,” we settled on the title “Honors Inquiry in Ireland.”

RESEARCH-BASED STRUCTURE

The Honors Inquiry in Ireland program takes advantage of the partnerships that undergird the Wexford-Savannah Axis research platform, both stateside and in Ireland. Selecting eleven students from a variety of majors, the initial 2014 program took place over the first of the two five-week terms that Georgia Southern University offers during the summer. These terms mandate daily classroom meetings, Monday through Friday. We spent the initial two and a half weeks in the U.S. and the final phase in Ireland.

When stateside, our students engaged in some campus-based instruction, which included conventional homework reading and writing assignments based on published scholarship. In class, we supplemented straight-up lecturing with several participative, artifact-based strategies: (1) discovery-driven archival work with a university librarian on microfilmed nineteenth-century Savannah newspapers; (2) analysis of a play set during the highly momentous Wexford Rebellion of 1798 and performed to open the 1870 dramatic season of the newly refurbished Savannah Theater; and (3) exercises with Google Maps to develop a sense of Wexford’s size, human geography, and nineteenth-century land- and water-transportation infrastructure. Also on campus, we facilitated an oral-interview session with two senior members of Savannah’s

Irish community whose respective forebears emigrated directly from Wexford in the early 1850s and had consequential impacts on the city: in one case its iron economy and in the other its dock-labor politics. These campus-based activities introduced the students to archival, interpretative, and interpersonal practices that they would have to perform with professionalism and efficiency in Ireland.

The larger portion of our U.S. time was spent off-campus, principally doing archival inquiry in the research center operated within the Savannah Historic District by one of the Wexford-Savannah Axis partners, the Georgia Historical Society (GHS). The students recognized that theirs was a serious endeavor thanks to the GHS's opening its center and providing research librarians on typically closed days just to facilitate the Wexford-Savannah Axis work. The students operated in teams to investigate the economic, cultural, and political dimensions of the nineteenth-century Irish immigrant experience in Savannah with special emphasis on Wexfordians. GHS possesses a fuller range of Savannah newspapers than the Georgia Southern library, but, in addition to using reportage, announcements, and advertisements contained in that material, the students identified, assessed, and synthesized data from multiple other sources such as naturalization documents, shipping and other commercial records, city directories, organizational minute books, and family papers. The themed approach proved effective in delivering coherent narratives, and we also observed each team share with the other teams discoveries that they might find useful. For instance, the economics team shared with the culture team the fact that a Wexford-born industrialist gifted a font to the Savannah cathedral rebuilding project.

Beyond GHS, the students built more knowledge about Wexford immigrants in Savannah by means of an extended session in the archives of the Catholic Diocese of Savannah and an investigative fieldtrip to Savannah's Catholic cemetery. One intended outcome of the former activity was to underscore that organizational and search systems, as well as visitor protocols, vary from one archive center to another. Reading headstones in the cemetery demonstrated that immigrants maintained an attachment not just to the county of Wexford but also to specific land divisions (parishes and townlands) within it. One of the students served as an official videographer and photographer throughout the term, and her pictorial record of toponyms on headstones reinforced the classroom Google Maps exercise.

In all, prior to their departure for Ireland the students acclimated to fundamental research practices but also gained—even created—knowledge

about Wexfordians in Savannah. That body of novel knowledge would prove a credentialing “calling card” for them once they crossed the Atlantic. In Ireland, both academics and members of the general public were enthusiastic to learn clearly contextualized Wexford immigrant stories from Savannah, especially given that the dominant narrative of Irish-American migration focuses on Northern and Midwestern cities like Boston and Chicago. Whereas most pre-trip orientation for study abroad positions students as consumers of data, our research-focused work on campus and in Savannah rendered the students producers, empowered for high-value intellectual engagement with their foreign hosts.

From their Irish base at the Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT), the students traveled to one local and three out-of-town archives. Their two faculty leaders—the directors of the Georgia Southern University Honors Program and the GSU Center for Irish Research and Teaching—prearranged the sessions, relying on networks already established by WIT and the John F. Kennedy Trust (the Irish partners in the Wexford-Savannah Axis project). While many study abroad fieldtrips configure as general overviews of site content, with a guide rehearsing fairly tired explanations, these archival sessions saw staff professionals eagerly interact with our researching students, sharing the endeavor. Each session had a specific purpose: for example, at the Wexford County Archives students examined original copies of the three major county newspapers published during the nineteenth century to quantify and evaluate advertisements and articles related to emigration to Savannah as well as to identify and analyze how contemporary Wexford life might have spurred leave-taking and shaped those who left.

The session at the National Archives of Ireland in Dublin proved particularly exciting because the students got to work with boxes of documents previously examined only once. These were minimally sorted papers—letters, invoices, commercial solicitations, and much more—belonging to one of the (now defunct) County Wexford shipping companies that operated a direct route to Savannah. As the students pushed through pages of nineteenth-century cursive script, they had to deploy their already acquired knowledge to join the dots. One useful discovery was a sense of how Savannah’s merchant elite actively reached out to the Irish company; another was the degree to which that company corresponded about Savannah as a destination with other enterprises in County Wexford and its hinterland, a case of regional networking that is of keen interest to the regional studies strand within the greater Wexford-Savannah Axis research project.

Authenticity is one of the eight Principles of Good Practice articulated by the National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE). In essence, this principle refers to offering students real, not simulated, learning experiences. Obviously, the mere fact of being abroad makes for real experiences: for example, American students interacting with Irish personages (from coach drivers to museum docents) on educational fieldtrips. However, the sense of authenticity may increase when an encounter with the foreign includes the elements of discernment and discovery as well as the personal investment—at once intellectual and emotional—inherent in doing research. Of course, one could oblige students to reproduce research already accomplished; certainly they would learn research skills by so doing. More authentic, though, is research that advances an original and substantive inquiry in which a greater team of researchers has a stake.

Assessment and evaluation in traditional study abroad programs generally mirror practices on the home campus: tests and examinations; in-class oral presentations; an end-of-semester rating by students of course content and delivery. We decided to supplement these elements by obliging students to present their research findings to two distinct Irish audiences. Such formal scenarios are qualitatively different from what might be termed “incidental contact” with the host community, an inevitable part of the study abroad experience. One audience was a public gathering of about seventy people at the Dunbrody Emigrant Experience, the heritage-tourism center mentioned above, and the other was a forum composed of approximately twenty academics at Waterford Institute of Technology. In these presentations, the students summarized their findings from their archival studies. They were challenged to build compelling narratives rooted in the personal stories of the people who emigrated as well as the conditions they faced when they arrived. This focus on narrative allowed us to emphasize that research is often only as valuable as our ability to communicate our results. Our students prepared for these high-stakes opportunities by working in small groups and *en masse*. The challenge of communicating with unfamiliar, real-world constituencies precipitated the kind of intellectual reflection and product design frequently highlighted in pedagogical literature but often taken less than seriously by students and even some professors.

The courses taught in the Honors Inquiry in Ireland program—called Inquiry in the Social Sciences and Inquiry in the Humanities—were rooted in inquiry- or problem-based pedagogies (Justice et al.). Courses with this approach tend to provide students with a set of questions or a problem to

explore. Perhaps especially in the natural sciences, the answers to the assigned problems are often known by the instructor(s), but, in the case of the Wexford-Savannah Axis, the two instructors appreciated that a relationship existed between the two focal locations but knew neither its extent nor what might be present in archival sources. To an important degree, therefore, the inquiry was open-ended.

A tension arises for faculty in these sorts of courses because inquiry- and problem-based settings place a great deal of responsibility on the participating students (English and Kitsantas). Problem-based learning “shifts the control, pacing, and direction of classroom activity to those engaged actively in the problem—our students” (Amador, Miles, and Peters 18). One disadvantage of this practice is that students could fail to learn what they need to in a given course. For example, Kirschner, Sweller, and Clark find that, without faculty guidance, students often do not learn or else reinforce misconceptions. The academic danger inherent in students’ taking greater control of their learning environment can, however, be substantially mitigated with consistent faculty feedback, rendering inquiry- and problem-based learning more effective than traditional instructional approaches (Hmelo, et al.; Alfieri et al.). The Honors Inquiry in Ireland program featured not just faculty feedback but also considerable real-time, expert input from archivists.

The students developed considerable ownership of the research they conducted in both Georgia and Ireland, but the professors were a constant, mentoring presence throughout. We wanted the students to view us both as clearheaded instructors and as fellow researchers, testing and sharing ideas. Frequently we had a base of knowledge to contextualize and advance the students’ hermeneutic endeavors. However, by the end of the trip they were helping each other interpret their results based on expertise they had developed. Rosalie Otero stresses the importance of having faculty members on the ground to lead research, particularly in international settings because, she argues, student-led programs have the potential to be weak educational experiences. We conclude that it is possible to create an atmosphere where students demonstrate and grow academic responsibility and project-ownership while professors maintain a strong mentorship role.

LESSONS LEARNED

While we, as the two project leaders, each had extensive experience with study abroad and undergraduate research, the Honors Inquiry in Ireland initiative constituted our first programmatic attempt to fully integrate these

two pedagogies. We believe that some important lessons emerged that will allow us to improve the experience in the future and that in addition may help others as they develop research-based study abroad.

- 1. Partnerships played a key role in making the program possible.** Partnerships are important for success in all sorts of experiential learning endeavors, not just study abroad. When traveling far from home, however, they become especially critical. In their analysis of effective study abroad programs, Camarena and Collins emphasize the importance of developing strong partnerships in the host community, especially if the program necessitates a variety of logistical details (see also Folds-Bennett and Twomey). Because the Honors Inquiry in Ireland program grew out of the multiparty transatlantic partnership of the Wexford-Savannah Axis research project, we were able to secure high-profile presentational opportunities as well as ready access to archives and archival experts while in Ireland.
- 2. The most important partnerships were within the university.** The key partnership upon which this program was built was not transatlantic; instead, it involved a partnership between the GSU Honors Program and the Center for Irish Teaching and Research—entities on the same campus. Honors directors and deans, particularly in resource-poor situations, are accustomed to developing partnerships to achieve programmatic outcomes. Study abroad should be no different, and in fact on-campus partnerships may be all the more necessary to achieve successful study abroad programming, especially in the development of a research-based program where expertise may reside outside the boundaries of the honors program.
- 3. The research context in this program was critical to its success.** Because the students were participating in a broader research project, they were able to see that their work had value beyond the confines of the course. Many research projects in the academy are presented to the professor for evaluation and then stop there. Students in our program had the opportunity to present their research to two audiences, and they knew that the results they identified would continue to be built upon as the research project continues to develop. Preparing for the presentations required students to develop their research knowledge such that they were capable of commanding the attention of their audiences; they were, after all, lecturing to Irish audiences not just about Irish history but

about a part of the history—the migration of Irish to the southeastern United States—that is not well-known. Also, participating in a broader research endeavor made it more feasible to engage in a relatively short-term research project. In most undergraduate research projects, students see a project through from beginning to completion. In this case, the overall research project will continue for years, so students were presenting meaningful in-progress reports on the results of their inquiries.

- 4. The transnational nature of the research project aided in student understanding and development.** While not all research-based study abroad programs need to have a comparative dimension, a benefit in this case was that the nature of the research question engaged students in research both in the U.S. and in Ireland. Students had the opportunity to develop their research skills and knowledge base before departing for the study abroad component of the trip. Furthermore, because the students were working with archival sources in two countries, they were in a position to compare their research experiences and to better understand the different norms of archival work in two different countries.
- 5. Student ownership of their research fostered motivation and created a shared sense of excitement regarding the project.** Trusting novice researchers to delve into archival sources to find details about migration patterns and their effects can be daunting to students and professors alike. Students in our program very quickly developed a keen sense of the importance of their roles as researchers, not simply students. Their presentations required them to develop a deeper understanding of their work. The energy that students committed to the project was infectious, especially in their archival work both in the U.S. and in Ireland. The research staff at both sites consistently remarked on the excitement that the students brought to the work, demonstrating that well-prepared and engaged undergraduate students can play an important role in advancing a research project.
- 6. The short-term nature of the project made participation more feasible for the professors and students.** Faculty have many cross-competing demands that make it difficult to take time away from campus or home to participate in study abroad programs. The same is true of many students, particularly those with majors outside of the liberal arts. Because the study abroad portion of the program was only two weeks long, the involvement of students and professors was relatively feasible

and affordable. Lyons notes the need for careful planning when developing short-term study abroad trips, but, when the program has a sound foundation, a short-term trip can achieve many of the same goals as a longer experience.

As we continue to develop our program for future years, we will continue to build upon these lessons, but Honors Inquiry in Ireland has already demonstrated that the development of a short-term, research-based study abroad program can fit the goals of an honors program and allow students to have a rich and meaningful international experience.

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