
AC 2011-1359: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO STUDY ABROAD

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A Multidisciplinary Approach to Study Abroad

Abstract

In 2009, the Engineering Technology, Surveying, and Digital Media Department at ETSU initiated a study abroad program in Rome, Italy. The desire was and is to create the first permanent study abroad center for the College of Business and Technology and the university. The benefits to the university from this establishment are great. This program has generated extra tuition dollars to the university and also recognition throughout the community. The lack of funding, a nonexistent culture of study abroad, and very little experience in teaching overseas necessitated an entrepreneurial approach.

This engineering technology-driven program has evolved to incorporate students from many other departments throughout campus (i.e., art, history, international studies, etc.). This has provided all students an opportunity to experience an engineering technology program they may not have had otherwise. The coursework focuses on the Roman architectural concepts, environmental sustainability, construction methods, materials, and applications.

The vision for this project is to have a permanent study center abroad or an *ETSU at Rome* campus. In 2009, the first class had 13 participants. In 2010, we offered three class choices for 17 students, and we will have approximately 25 students enrolled for 2011. Our growth is evolving as a result of creative thinking, partnerships, and a multidisciplinary approach. It is our intention to have a full summer program with numerous class offerings that will allow most ETSU students in the College of Business and Technology to complete a summer study in Rome and complete an entire semester of their degree requirements.

Many entrepreneurial approaches have been implemented into the program, and many creative aspects are still in the planning stages. Some of the issues include:

- A multidisciplinary curriculum that will benefit students and increase the influence of the College of Business and Technology throughout the entire university
- Partnerships with other departments and universities
- Access to a study abroad program that most students would not have the opportunity to experience
- The results of participation in the program
- Creative private funding solutions
- A mentorship program that allows students to benefit from community leaders and sponsors to the program

Currently we are working on developing articulation agreements with other departments on campus. With this agreement, our courses can be listed in each department's curriculums. Our program will become even more attractive to students once these courses are listed in curriculums.

In short, this program and the research presented will deal with an entrepreneurial and multidisciplinary way to create and grow an engineering technology-based study abroad program. Most universities face the same challenges with curriculum, funding, recruitment, partnerships, along with many other issues. How does one initiate a study abroad program that will attract students to enroll, attain funding, provide a curriculum that will meet various disciplines, and grow with success? We have documented our successes and plans for future growth for this engineering technology-driven study abroad program.

Vision

To many students, studying abroad has been a life-changing experience. A study conducted by Mary Dwyer, Ph.D. and Courtney Peters, from IES Abroad, evaluated the long-term effects of studying abroad in over 3,400 participants. According to this study 96% percent of study abroad participants credit their experience to an increase in personal development, while 94% credit this experience to increased intercultural development. Of the participants engaging in summer study abroad, 84% credited their study abroad experience to an enhanced interest in academic study¹. Additionally, further data has been collected documenting the impacts of study abroad to future career paths. “Students who studied abroad were more open to additional international experiences in their careers, and thus tailored their job searches to further that goal.”³

These studies, along with a study from Gutierrez² and many more, clearly indicate the cultural and personal development benefits to students. Receiving these benefits is particularly challenging for students at our university. Due to our geographic location, student demographic, prevailing culture, financial circumstances, our students face many obstacles to study abroad opportunities.

Aside from our program in Rome, Italy, the Department of Engineering Technology, Surveying, and Digital Media at ETSU has no study abroad programs. The idea for initiating a study abroad program within our department began in late 2007. The vision for this program has evolved since its inception. Our ultimate goal is to be a permanent presence abroad, alter the current region’s outlook on study abroad, and create a more diverse, multi-disciplinary curriculum for the students.

Our university is a regional university with a large majority of its students from this region. Many students from this region view studying abroad as an unattainable goal. The bulk of our students are not well-traveled, and some have never been on a plane. To these students, traveling to another continent seems too big, too incomprehensible, for them to accomplish.

Our multi-disciplinary approach to achieving our goals has proven vital to the success of our program. This approach has opened numerous doors to enhance the learning experience for our students. In addition, a multi-disciplinary curriculum can incorporate a larger number of students than a traditional one-course program. We believe that a study abroad program with a multi-disciplinary curriculum provides students a better opportunity international opportunity to learn and grow.

Many obstacles arise when creating a study abroad program, from curriculum to funding to recruitment. This paper describes how we face these obstacles and have created a successful program in Rome, Italy. We will address the following:

- Multi-Disciplinary Curriculum and Partnerships
- Marketing and Recruitment
- Creative Private Funding Solutions
- Innovative Mentorship Program

We are using this entrepreneurial and multi-disciplinary approach to studying abroad as a way to enhance international opportunities for students and to change the student culture regarding study abroad.

Multi-disciplinary Curriculum and Partnerships

In an effort to broaden the educational experience for our students, the College of Business and Technology at our institution has the goal of creating a permanent study abroad summer program in Rome, Italy. Additionally, it is our desire to extend the sphere of influence of the engineering technology program across disciplines on campus.

Obviously this goal has many challenges for any institution including funding, creation of a curriculum, recruitment of students, overseas facilities, and many other issues. Therefore, we decided to start the program by offering one pilot course and growing offerings through partnerships. In 2009, one course, entitled Architectural History in Rome, Italy, was offered and 13 students enrolled. Most of these students were engineering technology students and were familiar with the professor teaching the course. Also, they received credit for a three-hour elective to meet their degree requirements.

In the summer of 2010, the curriculum increased to include two courses, Architectural History and Innovation and Technology. Also, both courses were offered to undergraduate and graduate students. The Innovation and Technology course was a collaboration effort with a professor at the University of Rome. This collaboration helped to create international workshops and unique experiences for the students. The program grew to 17 students this year. The largest growth came from the interior design program, which is now a part of the Department of Engineering Technology, Surveying, and Digital Media. One key to recruiting interior design students was the addition of the Architectural History course into their curriculum as an accepted course. Moving away from special topic courses to core classes in a program is crucial to growth.

Now that the program has been established for two years, more students are enrolling. For the summer of 2011, 25 students have enrolled. Currently, we plan to offer the same courses as the previous year. However, we are planning for major growth in 2012. While in Rome this year, we will be planning the curriculum for three additional courses. The classes will include a graduate business class, a marketing class, and an entrepreneurial class. These courses will be created through partnerships from our business, communications and technology departments, along with a unique leadership group on campus. We are planning for 40-50 students to attend, and they will have the choice to take any of our five offerings. To include more opportunities for the

students, we are working on partnering with another university in Rome that teaches twelve courses. This will allow our students to take just one course for a short experience or complete an entire semester over the summer sessions. Also, students from other institutions will be allowed to take our courses and create a more diverse setting for learning.

Our plan of recruitment and added curriculum is working as we have doubled enrollment in just two years. Also, the added offerings are creating more than just additional classes. We can now bring different majors together in the classroom. For example, we can create a project to design and build a new Center for Sustainability in Rome, Italy. Each project team could include an architectural student from our partnering university to lead the design, an interior design student to develop interior solutions, a construction technology student to create estimates and construction schedules, communication students to initiate a marketing plan for the facility and program, and an MBA student to help with the financial aspects. This interaction will create a unique international learning experience with students from different campuses and backgrounds.

Currently, we are considering adding the Rome Program as a certificate program. The requirements could include a language component and another elective such as Renaissance Architecture or an International Politics or International Business course prior to departure. These classes combined with the courses a student would take in Rome provide the student with an added certificate. For example, a student could take four additional courses and they could graduate with their degree and a certificate in International Studies. This type of credential would be beneficial to students and also help attract and recruit additional students.

Funding is a large selling point for our students. Each student receives a major sponsorship from a community leader. This sponsorship, along with our institution's scholarships, provides for approximately half of the student's financial responsibility. We have successfully secured numerous donors over the first two years to support this program. However, in 2011 we are planning an alumni and donor trip that will include approximately 18-20 people. Included in the fee to be a part of the experience, each participant will sponsor a student for \$1,000. This will help the students, and the donors will actually get the opportunity to meet the individual they are assisting in Rome. Additionally, this important group will see first-hand the benefits of the program and all the Rome Center has to offer. Our hope is that they will continue to support students long after they return from Rome and collaborate with us to create more unique opportunities.

In short, our method has been to start with one course offering and grow. Each year we have partnered with different departments on campus or other institutions to expand the learning experience. In 2012, we should have a truly multi-disciplinary curriculum that will place students in an international program that is diverse and relevant. Partnerships will be essential to future success and creating a study center abroad that gives the students so much more than just a field trip.

Marketing/Recruitment

Much of the time and effort to run the *ETSU at Rome* program is placed into the marketing and recruitment aspect. When done correctly and efficiently, this aspect can significantly impact your program's success because without students there is no study abroad. Our program is advertised to students in several ways, including posters, word of mouth, study abroad fairs, and online.

We have found that the earlier and more often students are exposed to a study abroad program, the more likely they are to explore further details about the program. Therefore, *ETSU at Rome* posters are placed around campus in academic buildings, dormitories, and the student center building shortly into the fall semester. Our presence and recruitment at the university's study abroad fair has brought in numerous students to the program through the years.

Every year, a portion of our students hear about the program from our class-to-class presentations. Shortly into the fall semester, we will conduct a short presentation of our program to different classrooms throughout campus.

After the initial group to study in Rome, each year we have had students enrolling because a friend from the previous trip recommended they go. With each year passing, this form of recruitment will only grow stronger. Our focal point of information for all students, sponsors, and faculty is online. An *ETSU at Rome* Facebook page serves as a hub of information, pictures, and discussions. We post pictures online while in Rome so that family and friends back home can view these pictures while we are abroad.

This program's major online source for information is the *ETSU at Rome* program's website, www.etsurome.com. This site was designed and created by a faculty member and two graduate students. This website will incorporate photo galleries, program details, donor recognition, various forms, and previous work (i.e., sketches, projects, writings, etc.). It will also serve as a focal point of information for anyone interested in the program.

Our best recruitment technique is the attention to students. Prior to student enrollment, we meet with each student for roughly 30 minutes to discuss details about the trip: cost, housing, flights, coursework, itinerary, etc. One-on-one attention with the students is an important aspect to recruitment. We also hold pre-departure meetings with the students to discuss specific details to ensure sufficient preparation. This attention and focus can increase their comfort levels and improve their overall experience. This is quite essential at our university because we have found that many of our local students have a mentality that study abroad is out of their reach.

Creative Private Funding Solutions

Student funding to study abroad is the greatest obstacle for most students at our university. The approximate costs for a student to complete a three-hour course in Rome lasting three weeks are:

Table 1: Approximate Costs per Student

\$2,475	Program costs (housing, side trips, etc.)
\$1,000	Airfare
\$ 795	Tuition
\$ 500	Food
\$ 300	Books, passport, entry fees, other
\$5,070	TOTAL

For most of our students, this cost is quite extensive. However, there is some financial aid at ETSU which assist in these expenses. Every student at ETSU pays a \$10 fee per semester for foreign travel. This money is made available in the form of scholarships to students who desire to travel abroad. For the *ETSU at Rome Program*, students can apply for up to \$1,500 (\$500 per week) if they have a 2.75 grade point average and demonstrate financial need. In addition, the course must also directly meet their degree requirements. During the first two years of the program, a high percentage of our students received the full amount. Once the scholarship is applied, the overall program cost is reduced to \$3,570. However, this amount is still considerably high for our students.

Considering the financial challenges, an entrepreneurial approach to attaining private funding was necessary. Using an approach designed by the University of Indiana School of Philanthropy, we started researching potential funding sources. This approach scores and ranks potential giving prospects in three categories: (1) linkage, (2) ability, and (3) interest. Linkage is the relationship one has with the university. For example, are they a foundation member, a staff member, or alumni? Ability refers to one’s resources. Does this potential donor have significant personal wealth or influence over corporate giving? Finally, interest simply refers to one’s interest in the program. Are they an engineer, architect, contractor or just an individual who has traveled abroad and knows the importance of such an experience? All prospects were rated on a scale of 1 (representing the lowest) to 3 (representing the highest) in each of the three categories. A total score is tallied for each prospect. Then focus is emphasized on the highest scores (9s), followed by 8s and so forth. This allows fundraising members to prioritize and identify the best prospects.

Table 2: Potential Donor Evaluation Chart

Prospect	Linkage	Ability	Interest	Score
Loyal Donor & General Contractor	3	2	3	8
Tennessee Bank of Money	2	3	1	6
Federal Reserve	0	3	0	3

In 2008, our original approach to fundraising was to target engineers, architects, and contractors who had been contracted to complete work on campus within the last five years. With this approach, we were already keying in on potential sponsors who would rate extremely high on our Potential Donor Evaluation Chart. These prospects are strongly linked to our university, capable of donations, and interested in the engineering technology field. Essentially, we were asking these organizations to consider sponsoring a student in their field to study abroad for

\$1,000. This approach was quite successful, and all 13 of our students in the 2009 course received a sponsorship, while the majority received the ETSU International Scholarship. Cumulatively, \$27,560 in scholarships and sponsorships were provided for the 2009 class.

While private funding for the 2009 class came from one industry, the fundraising for the 2010 class needed new strategies. For the second year, focus was directed towards individuals with strong university ties, an interest in study abroad, or past history in support of the College of Business and Technology. Media coverage, word-of-mouth, and strong university leadership helped attract new donors and provide stewardship to the donors already in place. With 17 students enrolled in the 2010 class, sponsorships from 16 donors were provided, in addition to numerous ETSU scholarships that were granted. Funding provided to the 2010 class reached approximately \$38,000.

Fundraising for 2011 is in its initial stages. This year, larger gifts and endowments will be added to fundraising efforts. Currently, a \$24,000 endowment has been initiated to provide additional funds to the program. Also, a solicitation to a major donor has been initiated. This proposal for a \$25,000 - \$50,000 endowment is under consideration. It is our goal to create major gifts and endowments to provide financial stability for future growth and efforts.

The fundraising for this program is largely benefitted from the strong ties throughout university leaders. The university president, department dean, and our program instructors have all contributed funds to this program. Additionally, other faculty and staff, including the provost, have donated to help students attain any available funding.

Finally, there has been a focused effort to initiate and maintain a strong stewardship program. The stewardship between our program and its students with the donors is discussed further in the following chapter. In addition to this stewardship, these sponsors are recognized in local newspapers, campus publications, and other marketing materials. Another stewardship opportunity will be our donor trip taking place during the 2011 trip. We believe that this opportunity to visit our study center and personally meet the student they are sponsoring will be very beneficial to the future funding of our program.

The fundraising efforts to date have provided over \$100,000 in support of the *ETSU at Rome Program*. Once we return from Rome, we hold a gathering on campus for sponsors and students. At this gathering, students express their gratitude towards their sponsors for their contribution. A majority of our students have never traveled abroad, and some have never even flown. Their stories have been told, and they have touched the hearts of our sponsors. These stories and interactions with their sponsored student have resulted in the donors feeling good about their investment and feeling special to their student and the university. Our goal is that with continued personal involvement by the donors, the students will be provided with new, creative opportunities to learn and study abroad.

Innovative Mentorship Program

Without private funding, our program would not be as successful as it is today. We have found through our innovative mentorship program that sponsors, students, and this program all benefit.

Each sponsor is assigned a specific student so they can directly see how our university and this program benefit from their donation. The student/sponsor relationships fostered through this mentorship program have produced lasting friendships, as well as some internships.

Prior to departure, all students are encouraged to send a thank you letter to their sponsor. Every student also sends a postcard while the group is visiting Vatican City. Additionally, we make a short video clip of the student expressing their appreciation in front of a monument or site. This clip is emailed to the sponsors while we are in Rome.

Last year, every student purchased a wine stopper and presented this gift to their sponsor during our campus gathering. This gathering is for every student and sponsor, held shortly after we return home on campus. This is used to let the students articulate their appreciation to the sponsors. Many students look forward to the opportunity that they can express their thanks to their sponsor in person.

This gathering has proven to be a great success in many ways. At this gathering, several sponsors express their desire to support the following year's program. Traditionally, a donor sends money to a university, receives recognition via newsletter or plaque, receives a thank you letter from the university but never sees directly how their contribution impacts students' lives. With this gathering, each sponsor has the opportunity to see the direct impact of their contributions.

Entrepreneurial Elements

Typically, in a traditional setting, all elements involved with taking university courses differ tremendously from taking courses with the *ETSU at Rome Program*. Traditionally, students will sign up for courses online, pay tuition with financial aid or personal funds, attend the meetings in a classroom setting, and receive a grade.

With our program, entrepreneurial elements exist in the funding of the program, as well as the learning environment. In relation to our private funding and mentorship program, every student not only receives a sponsorship from a community leader, but also has the opportunity to create a lasting friendship. The innovative and entrepreneurial approach to student learning has proven advantageous to our students. We have established partnerships that extend throughout Rome so that students can participate in guided tours with students and professors from other universities.

Additionally, some students are provided an opportunity to be involved in international workshops and other collaborations in an international setting. These experiences are largely afforded to our graduate students. These students are only abroad for a short period of time, but the educational results and the credentials received can be significant. Graduate opportunities are available for students to partner with an advisor to set up a specific area of research or study topic. In 2010, a number of our graduate students were provided a walking tour through Rome on sustainability design specifically geared towards their field of study and their research interests. These students were required to present their research and information in an international workshop to a very culturally diverse group. Our students are provided opportunities to gain research access to current international topics, experts and professors in relevant fields, exposure to international students and their cultural characteristics. This research, international workshop

presentations, and experiences allow the students to build credentials not available in a typical curriculum.

In the traditional classroom setting, students rarely obtain a long-term relational benefit, especially from the funding aspect. This program offers and requires students to network and interact with leaders in their field. Many educational and professional benefits result from this facet of the program. One example of such success was a student paired with the President/CEO of a nationally known architectural firm. Additionally, this student was interested in extending his research in this field at the graduate level. From the mentorship and guidance provided by this business professional, this student obtained an internship with the firm and is currently working in the field. Other students have been sponsored by mayors, CEOs, and other community leaders, in which many of these relationships continue today. It is this entrepreneurial approach to study abroad that every student in the program is taught to benefit from. Preliminary results indicate that students are attaining jobs, career advice, and many other benefits from this mentorship aspect. It is our expectation that this entrepreneurial approach to combining funding opportunities with mentorship will continue to create win-win results for donors and students alike.

Conclusion

It is a challenge to create permanent study abroad courses at a regional university. We have found that the issues with funding and curriculum can be overcome with entrepreneurial approaches and multi-disciplinary partnerships.

Affording our donors the opportunity to meet with their student and learn first-hand how they improved the student's learning experience makes the donors feel good about this program. This is unique, and one should not underestimate the value of involving donors and clearly demonstrating that they have made a positive impact. Certainly, there are many organizations that will partner with universities to create study abroad opportunities for students. However, much more can be gained from a university with a permanent center abroad. Students, professors, community leaders and others will attain far more success when each is personally invested in a program which they can call their own.

Our study abroad idea started with one course, and our methodology has been to increase student enrollment and course offerings. In order to achieve this, we have instituted a truly multi-disciplinary approach towards evolving the curriculum. We have found that through partnerships on campus and abroad, we can grow into a successful international program affording students numerous opportunities to study abroad. The challenges to creating a permanent study abroad program are many, but the rewards are great. Be assured that a well thought out plan and a passion from department and university leaders will allow most any institution to achieve success.

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