

Learning From Our Mistakes **Study Abroad Grant Writing and Program Management**

Colleen Ebacher, Towson University
Ronn Pineo, Towson University
John Shock, Baltimore City Public Schools

We have designed and managed five short-term study abroad programs for K-12 teachers, three in Mexico and two in Perú. While the programs have been rewarding, we made many mistakes along the way. Given our experiences, we thought that those considering writing a grant proposal to run a study abroad program might profit from hearing the lessons we've learned.

Sharing the Work

The application process takes numerous hours of research and writing, yet it may not be successful on the first try. One way to make the task more manageable is to have two program directors or principal investigators. If you decide to co-write your proposal and co-direct your program, be sure to choose someone with whom you work well.

Where are You Going?

Our experiences taught us that it is impossible to write a strong grant proposal without having traveled to the proposed host city. Go there first to seek out a good host institution for language instruction and cultural enrichment. Visiting the site, seeing the physical infrastructure, interviewing instructors, and establishing a personal relationship with the institution's leadership are essential. The logistics for each field experience will be too difficult to plan and manage without a detailed understanding the situation on the ground.

Finding Good Site Guides

It is too much to expect that you will have a detailed understanding of every local ruin or museum you plan to visit. Guides with site-specific knowledge can help bridge that gap. Your host institution and universities can make recommendations, however we found our best guides—or really determined who not to bring back—only after hearing them work. Too many commercial guides, anxious not to lose their audience, stretched the truth, sometimes filling our participants' heads with nonsense. Rather than carrying on high-powered debates with guides on the spot, our practice was to keep notes and clear up any confusion at later meetings, or in the case of rather more stunning errors, with the participants on the bus ride home.

Grant Proposal Writing & Rewriting

Every funding agency is quite specific about what it wants, in what order, at what length, and in what format. Following the directions to a T is critical. One of the best pieces of advice for any grant proposal is to contact the program officer associated with the grant program. They should be able to answer any questions and provide helpful

guidance. Further, if your first submission is rejected, learn from that experience. Request the outside readers' reviews. If asked, funding agencies will usually send you copies of the evaluations, with comments, criticisms, and their numerical scoring. Determine where the most points were lost and move to correct identified shortcomings.

One concern voiced by evaluators of our earliest submission was the lack of an adequate mechanism for assessment. Accordingly, we amended our program budget to pay for the services of an outside assessment specialist who helped design a pre- and post-departure assessment instrument. A discussion of assessment procedures was included in our next application, and the program was funded.

The Budget has to be Trimmed

When your acceptance letter arrives it may call for cuts to the budget. There is no point in padding the budget in the application to account for anticipated cuts; such subterfuge will be spotted immediately and harm your chances for acceptance. The best approach is go through the budget line by line. What are the most expensive activities? Rank the activities and determine which are least vital. Consider making one planned activity an optional excursion requiring a co-payment by participants. Another option is to increase the overall cost-share paid by participants.

Assessment

Information provided through assessment tools has been important in guiding the on-going revisions of our programs. For example, we learned through assessment that some of the participants were exhausted during the program. As grant writers we had thought to make the program of study as rigorous as possible, lest it be dismissed by the funding agency as inadequately robust, but it was clear that we pushed this goal too far. Armed with data from our assessment instruments, we shortened the morning sessions, lengthened the lunch break, and broke up the afternoon activities to include at least one non-lecture pursuit. Funding for this modified, less exhausting program, was secured largely because our assessment instruments supplied evidence of the need for these changes.

Recruiting the Best Team of Participants

Each year we sought to assemble strong and diverse teams representing a wide array of subject areas and skills. Because our programs have been in Latin America, we made special recruitment efforts in school districts in the United States with the highest number of Hispanics. We wrote directly to principals, chairs, and teachers, to encourage faculty to apply. These outreach efforts were highly successful. Diversity in the team is vital, assuring that conversations amongst participants are wide-ranging and inclusionary. The participants' applications included a letter of support from their principal, with the understanding that we would report back on the participant's success in the program. This future letter to their principal has proven useful to ensuring accountability by program participants.

We now include a 20 minute Web-Ex interview for the top 20 candidates (for the available 15 positions). As co-directors we found that our pre-interview selections of potential participants diverged widely, following the Web-Ex interviews, however, our lists matched almost exactly. Be warned, interviews represent a vast investment of time.

After the team is set and all participant fees paid, we hold four pre-departure meetings via Web-Ex, each meeting lasting three to four hours. We use these meetings to make our expectations for the work ahead very clear.

Things to Watch Out For

In an early version of the program, we made the mistake of beginning classes the day after arrival. We since learned that participants need a day to adjust and settle in. We recommend being especially watchful over housing issues in the first days. Not every home stay situation is a good fit. Expect to do some relocating.

Inevitably, some participants will have difficulty in adjusting to living away from home. Probe for concerns in this area in the interview process while there is still time to select those who are best-equipped to meet the challenges of working abroad. At each pre-departure meeting we returned to the theme of getting ready to travel and live outside of one's comfort zone.

We recommend encouraging participants to seek the help of their home stay family, the staff at the language and culture host school, any curriculum development liaison (for us, a returning participant from a prior program abroad), only turning as a final resort to the co-directors. As co-directors we always refrained from making decisions without first discussing matters with one another. We regularly reminded the participants that all activities were the product of a myriad of complex considerations—pedagogic, financial, and logistical—and therefore could not be changed in the middle of the program. We reminded participants of their responsibilities in each of the pre-departure meetings and returned to this theme regularly while abroad.

Coming Back

Upon returning home, we have too often watched the well-intentioned promises of participant follow-through fade away as they rejoin their families and start the new school year. We now hold two Web-Ex meetings in the following school year to monitor participants' progress. The ambitions for our programs are large: the development of curricula that is informed by the best recent scholarship, lessons that turn on deeper analytical themes, teaching units that are attractive and readily accessible to fellow educators, and dissemination into widely publicized venues which teachers most use when developing their lessons. If the participant teaches at a school nearby, we drive out for an in-person classroom observation, provided of course that their school principal grants us permission.

Thinking about Going Again

Life abroad may not be easy. And yet, we keep going. We do so because we know that there is no better way to understand the subject content we teach. Moreover, there is nothing more gratifying than seeing participants gracefully and effectively present material they encountered while abroad. To see the great positive impact on the education of their students makes it all worthwhile. We encourage you to apply and to run a program abroad. It is absolutely worth all the effort.

Corresponding Author: Ronn Pineo