PROFILE OF A STUDENT EXCHANGE PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

An expanding global economy has created a new environment for the American business school graduate prompting business schools to internationalize their curricula. The addition of experiential learning enriches these curricula. To address inherent obstacles in providing such experiential learning, a one-for-one student exchange model was instituted. This paper discusses the features of that model, the issues involved in implementing it, institutional influences affecting these issues, and a way to affect those influences.

THE NEED

An expanding global economy has created a new environment for the American business school graduate. Yesterday's differentiators (e.g., computer literacy, communication skills, work experience, and good grades) have become today's qualifiers. As business becomes increasingly international, the demand for "worldly" skills rises. Although America has made some significant strides in the new world order of international trade, we are still experiencing an annual trade deficit, still supporting some highly protective trade policies, still uncertain about free trade agreements, still encouraging consumers to "Buy American", and still have an ethnocentric population that, for the most part, speaks only one language.

This has prompted business schools to internationalize their curricula by (1) installing new international courses, (2) adding international units to existing courses, (3) making a second language a graduation requirement, and (4) establishing new international options or majors. To support these new efforts, business schools are also updating and developing their faculty by offering them in-service training programs; international seminars, conferences, and workshops; and international travel opportunities.

In addition, today's global business environment demands self-directed people who are culturally sensitive, adaptable, and possess the meta-skills to operate comfortably in a variety of uncertain situations.

More language training and more international course work is not enough. While these courses teach new knowledges, skills, and understandings, they often ignore the student's personal development needs. They do not effectively change an ethnocentric orientation nor are they good at developing self-reliance, a tolerance for uncertainty, or an ability to adapt. Although existing courses give students new academic skills, they do not instill in them a true appreciation of global environments or an attitude toward cultural sensitivity. To graduate future business leaders with both the academic abilities and the personal qualities needed for success in a global environment, their education needs to include real-world international experience as well as classroom instruction.

THE OBSTACLES

There are significant obstacles which make it difficult to develop and implement an international experience for students. First among these is the cost of studying in a foreign country. The additional tuition, travel, and living expenses incurred make the costs of foreign study prohibitive to students.

A second obstacle is the fact that foreign study tends to delay the student's graduation. If they enroll in an already packaged foreign study program, the courses may or may not fit their educational interests or needs. Even when students work directly with a foreign institution in selecting a course of study, the course work is frequently incompatible with the courses at their home institution. As a result, such courses are usually counted as free electives and cannot be used to meet the degree requirements in a specific option or major. The student's progress toward graduation, therefore, is essentially on hold while they are out of the country.

Language is still an obstacle for most mainstream Americans. Students must develop additional language skills or eventually find themselves in business situations where they are tied to interpreters or bound to agreements that can be negotiated in English. In addition to improving their international communication skills, the learning of another culture's
language represents a large step toward the student's understanding of that culture.

One of the more significant obstacles blocking a student's international involvement is the fear and inertia which comes from their own ethnocentric orientation. Because of this orientation, many students are either indifferent toward or intimidated by the prospect of living in a foreign environment.

THE MODEL

To overcome these obstacles, a specific, annual, one-for-one, student exchange model was developed between California State University, Fresno and the University of Central Lancashire in Preston, England. The design intends to offer students an international learning experience where the environment is not intimidating, where the cost is affordable, and where the credits are fully transferable. The philosophy of this program is learner centered. It places heavy emphasis on meeting the personal development needs of individual students while enhancing their ability to understand and function within a rapidly changing global environment.

Over one-third of those enrolled at Fresno State are first generation college students. Many others, even though their parents may be college graduates, have spent their lives in the San Joaquin Valley, have limited travel experience, and have a somewhat parochial mindset. England was selected as the location for this student exchange because it offers a sort of "half-way house" introduction to international living for these uninitiated students easily intimidated by foreign cultures. Its subtle differences in language and lifestyle, its membership in the European Union, and its proximity to Continental Europe provide opportunities for an international exposure rich enough to teach yet mild enough for the students to cope. Students who have participated return with an enlightened view of the world, a new perspective on America, and the self-confidence to pursue more exotic international experiences.

Except for the price of their round-trip air fare, the cost for this year of study is the same as a year of study on the Fresno campus. This is a one-for-one exchange. One American student for one English student. When each student pays their home institution costs, they are paying for the slot that will be used by their visiting counterpart. The English student pays the University of Central Lancashire costs and the California student pays the Fresno State costs. In this way, each student can participate as a fully-paid student at their host institution at home institution prices. Included in these prices are all tuition and fees, dormitory accommodations, and meal expenses. The cost of textbooks and personal expenses are not included. Experience has shown that students can participate in this one-year program for prices equal to many of the pre-packaged semester programs.

This program is also unique in that it allows Fresno State students to use the credits they earn in England to satisfy their degree requirements here at home. As a result, these students can enroll in the English courses without delaying their graduation. The program, initiated in the Marketing Department at the Sid Craig School of Business, was originally intended only for business students. It is now open to all Fresno State students and offers a wide range of courses in biology, business, chemistry, computer sciences, electronics, engineering, journalism, languages, mathematics, nursing, physics, psychology, social studies, social work, statistics, and a variety of special interest topics.

It all begins when interested students meet with the Coordinator of the International Business Center in the Sid Craig School of Business. Students are asked to bring with them a list of courses they need for graduation. From this list, courses are selected which can be matched with courses from the University of Central Lancashire catalog and pre-approval signatures are secured from the home campus departments involved. Upon their return from England, the credits earned in these approved courses will count toward the student's degree requirements - the same as if they had taken them at Fresno State. Proof that the process works is the fact that returning students have graduated on time.

THE IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

A number of issues arise in the process of implementing this cooperative arrangement between these two educational bureaucracies.

Educational Differences

The basic educational delivery system in the United Kingdom is different in many ways from that found in the United States. The English student must complete foundation and general education courses in high school before taking their qualifying, or "A", exams. Therefore, theirs is a three-year degree program with no general education requirements. The student's entire degree curriculum is a specialized course of studies similar to those found in our options or majors.
There are no lower and upper division courses and many of their prerequisites are different. As a result, it is often difficult to identify equivalent courses between the two catalogs.

To further complicate matters, theirs is a system of "credits" while ours is a system of semester hours or "units". Our typical three-unit course assumes a 15 week semester, three hours of class time per week, and two hours of outside work for every hour in class. Their typical five credit course continues for a full academic year. Students may attend class only once, two, or three hours per week and are expected to do most of their studying outside of class. This makes it difficult to determine the units of credit earned.

Teaching methodologies are also different. English students normally attend one large-group lecture session and one small-group seminar per week. The senior course professor conducts the lecture while other faculty, called "tutors" conduct the seminars. Instead of a textbook, students are given a bibliography of books from the library. While our courses include weekly assignments and frequent testing, the English professors typically require large term papers and give only one comprehensive exam at the end of each course. As a result, both the English and the American students are required to develop new learning patterns and new study skills.

Without a formal articulation agreement, the process of matching courses and determining credits can be a bit time consuming. Once each student has identified the courses they need, a possible equivalent must be located in the host institution's catalog. Course descriptions for these possible substitutes must then be reviewed and approved by the chairs of the appropriate departments. In many cases, a catalog description is insufficient and a course syllabus must be obtained before approval can be determined. Since the student candidates may come from any discipline on campus, a large variety of courses and many departments are involved. For general education courses, approval must be obtained from the faculty review committee in the Evaluations Office.

Although the cooperating agreement between the two institutions endorses the principle of "mutual recognition and trust", there is a wide variation in the degree of flexibility exercised in the department approval process. Some departments assume a "good faith" posture and ignore minor differences in course content, prerequisites, and pedagogy. Others insist upon almost "cloned" courses and a review of the student's transcript before granting their approval. Over time, this laborious process will be simplified. A documented inventory of previous approvals can be used as precedents, resulting in a sort of pro-forma articulation agreement.

Even after the students have gained all the necessary approvals and have crossed the Atlantic, problems may arise. Courses they had hoped to take may be full, or cancelled, or offered at a conflicting time. Academic calendars and class schedules are exchanged, pre-registration materials are provided, and long-distance registration is arranged to minimize these problems. However, when they occur, new approvals must be obtained rapidly before late registration periods end. Needless to say, FAX and e-mail circuits between Fresno, California and Preston, England are busy during these periods.

Administrative Differences

In addition to the pedagogical differences, there also are differences in administrative policies and procedures. The difficulties created here are not a function of the degree of difference. They are a function of an institution's flexibility and/or willingness to adapt.

Based on the principle of "mutual recognition and trust" each home campus is able to qualify the students who will participate. However, all students must go through an international student application process. Student transcripts are exchanged, passports must be obtained, visa status must be authorized, and health insurance policies must be purchased or verified. In this process, a number of differences exist between the two institutions. For example, the English students are required to obtain student visa status; the American students are not. The English students must purchase a health insurance policy or show proof of adequate coverage. The American student should obtain travel insurance but has access to the English "socialized medicine" once they have been officially admitted and enrolled. The American student must have their absence from campus authorized to avoid losing their catalog status. To address these differences and to negotiate the bureaucracies, a virtual blizzard of forms must be completed, submitted, and filed for each student. Even some new forms had to be approved and filed to exempt these students from provisions documented by established forms.

Dorm accommodations must be arranged because participating students are required to live on-campus during their stay at the host institution. This requirement facilitates the student's integration into
campus life at the host institution. It also makes it easier to implement. Arranging reciprocal, one-for-one agreements with a variety of off-campus landlords in two countries is not very practical.

Once again, differences must be reconciled. Dorm residents on the Fresno campus are required to purchase a meal plan and eat at the Residence Dining facility. There is no meal plan in England because the dorms are equipped with communal kitchens. Therefore, the American student pays the home institution dorm fees before leaving then buys groceries and cooks in England. The English student also pays the home institution dorm fees before leaving but must buy their meal plans when they arrive in Fresno.

Academic calendars and the exchange circumstances create additional differences that must be reconciled. The American school year begins in late August and ends in late May, with a three-week Winter and one-week Spring break. The English school year begins in late September and ends in late June with a shorter Winter break and a longer Spring break. Dorms tend to shut down during these break periods and, since most exchange students cannot afford to go home, special arrangements need to be made and additional fees must be paid to house and feed those who do not have holiday travel plans. In addition, students from both countries must arrive at their host campus one week before the semester begins to participate in international orientation sessions. Dorm and meal accommodations must be made available at these times as well.

Financing is one of the primary areas of concern to the students. The principle of a one-for-one exchange assumes an exchange of equal value. That is why the exchange agreement states that "no monetary consideration will be exchanged between the institutions." And so, even though the basic cost of tuition, fees, and accommodations are different between the two campuses, each student is paying their home institution rates so there is no problem. However, when students are charged additional fees, they begin to see evidence of unfair treatment. For example, all students must pay a security deposit on their dormitory rooms, but the amounts are slightly different. Different fees are charged for the international orientation sessions. The cost of English groceries is not always equivalent to the cost of the American meal plan. It is impossible to reconcile these differences to the penny. That is why it is important to keep these additional charges to a minimum and to provide the students with full disclosures at the outset.

One of the advantages of this educational package is its low student cost. Nevertheless, the "pay-as-you-go" American student still faces some financial problems. The reason is two-fold. First of all, the American students are accustomed to paying their housing costs monthly and their tuition fees each semester. However, the university requires exchange students to pay these costs for the entire year before their departure. One large payment is a lot more difficult than several smaller ones. Secondly, a large percentage of Fresno State students receive some form of financial assistance. Those participating in this program face a "Catch-22". While they must pay all their program fees before departing, they cannot get their assistance until after they arrive in England and send back proof of their enrollment.

Institutional inflexibility is an underlying factor in many of the implementation issues outlined above. Educational bureaucracies tend to lock themselves into a set of procedures and tend to adopt an "if it was not invented here" attitude when asked to change. To address this tendency toward inertia, a series of short-term staff exchanges has been implemented. Key administrative personnel from such areas as Admissions, Accounting, Student Services, Evaluations, etc. are selected. Those selected engage in short-term exchanges to (1) create a greater understanding of and appreciation for the educational delivery system and administrative practices of partner institutions and (2) to explore ways to harmonize and develop greater institutional compatibility.

THE EPILOGUE

The student exchange between California State University, Fresno and the University of Central Lancashire has been a rich educational experience for the students involved. As it gains visibility, its popularity is increasing. Last year, twelve students participated. This year, seventeen are involved and plans are already being made to expand it into Spain. However, success may create a new set of problems. While the program provides a meaningful experience for students, it is staff intensive and it generates no new institutional income. As a result, the funds and staffing needed to promote the program, to recruit and qualify its students, and to manage its implementation may be difficult to get. In an institution oriented to quantity-based education and FTES, the program will merely survive. In an institution committed to quality-based education and the student learner, it will thrive.