

Internationalizing Public Relations and Advertising Education: The Role of a Study-Abroad Experience

Howard W. Combs*

ABSTRACT

In studying the need for international exposure by American university students in the 21st century, the U.S. Commission on Study Abroad concluded that “What nations don’t know can hurt them. The stakes involved in study abroad are that simple, that straightforward, and that important. For their own future and that of the nation, college graduates today must be internationally competent.”

International experiences are a requisite to understanding the interdependence of nations and markets as well as the concepts of the various disciplines. Without the comprehension of global issues, education is not complete. Students, faculty, and organizations need a global outlook and should make a serious effort to understand foreign languages, culture, and business practices. Globally focused institutions like Chulalongkorn University play an important part in educating future business and non-business managers to meet international challenges.

This paper discusses a direct-experience, hands-on approach to studying public relations and advertising that involves collaboration between Chulalongkorn University and San Jose State University in California. This collaboration led to a mutually beneficial study abroad relationship. The components of an experimental course, titled “Cross-Cultural Marketing Communications in Southeast Asia,” are described. The paper also covers the collaboration, impact, evaluation plan, and implications.

*Howard W. Combs Professor of Marketing San Jose State University San Jose, California

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF STUDY ABROAD

The United States has a lengthy history of participation in study abroad but it has mainly been the domain of wealthy males. In a study of the history of study abroad, Sell (1983), reported that it was quite common for the adolescent sons of affluent families to travel to Western Europe for their post-secondary education. Most study abroad education was in foreign language.

Even after colleges and universities were founded in the United States, a select number of students continued to travel abroad to receive advanced specialized training at foreign universities. Not until the time period between the first and second World Wars, when the "Junior Year Abroad" program was established for educational, economic, military and political reasons, did the number and demographics of students participating in international education begin to change (Sell, 1983).

Early study abroad continued to focus on foreign language instruction. In time, the field of higher education itself began to change after World War II and so did the purpose and scope of international education. The U.S. government enacted legislation (such as the G.I. Bill) to provide veterans with financial support for higher education. Additional legislation provided financial aid packages for women students, African American students, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. This contributed to a drastic increase in the number of students pursuing higher education and also

to the number of students studying abroad.

While the vast majority of the small number of students studying abroad did so for a semester, alternative short-term study abroad programs were created. Now students had options as to how long to remain abroad as well as what to study while abroad. Increasingly, students were able to choose from a variety of academic disciplines, instead of being limited to the traditional option of foreign language and literature (Sell, 1983).

Over the past ten years the number of students who participate in study abroad has risen dramatically. However, the reality is that only about 1% of the total college student population study abroad today (Marklein, 2003).

Unfortunately, many institutions of higher education may discourage students from studying abroad through such factors as faculty resistance and inflexible curricula (Marklein, 2003). The cost of international education expenses (influenced by monetary exchange rates), coupled with the temporary or permanent loss of a paying job (increasingly important today as most students work), also act as a significant factors dissuading students from studying abroad (Sell, 1983). Recently designed short-term programs have been created to overcome many of these barriers.

Recently Hovde (2002) has pointed to evidence demonstrating that most U.S. college students are unwilling or unable to spend a semester or more abroad. Furthermore, individual students may have their own

academic, personal, social or cultural reasons for not wanting to study abroad (Tuma, 2002). In other cases, the parents of students may be opposed to sending their sons and daughters to countries or cultures that they know little about.

NEED FOR OVERSEAS EXPERIENCE

Policy makers, educators, and students alike have a basic obligation to take advantage of the opportunities to learn and transmit the knowledge of the world. College education is not immune to the force of globalization. According to Dan Okimoto, a professor of political science at Stanford University, “universities in the 21st century will have to be international universities serving a collective good, not simply a national good.” International experiences are not luxuries; they are a necessary condition to the full understanding of the various academic disciplines and their concepts.

In 2004, the U.S. Congress established the Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program. In 2005, the bi-partisan Commission made recommendations to the President and the Congress that included increasing participation in study abroad programs to one million U.S. undergraduates per year by 2017. The Commission also established the goal of increasing the diversity of the study abroad population and increasing the number of students going to non-traditional countries of destination. In summary, the commission concluded that”

“What nations don’t know can hurt them. The stakes involved in study

abroad are that simple, that straightforward, and that important. For their own future and that of the nation, college graduates today must be internationally competent.”

“Promoting and democratizing undergraduate study abroad is the next step in the evolution of American higher education. Making study abroad the norm and not the exception can position this and future generations of Americans for success in the world in much the same way that establishment of the land-grant university system and enactment of the GI Bill helped create the ‘American century’.”

- U.S. COMMISSION ON THE ABRAHAM LINCOLN STUDY ABROAD FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM (2005)

While educators and the public are aware of the significance and impact of international education, there appears to be difficulty to agree on what comprises international education. Does international education require a study-abroad component, or can international education be taught at home? Is it a matter of language in the sense that education automatically becomes international when English (or another foreign language) is used for instruction? Does a program become international if it uses a curriculum developed abroad (e.g., U.S. or British curriculum)? Or is it a matter of perspective that requires geocentricity to be differentiated from ethnocentricity and polycentricity? An increasing number of educators believe that a comprehensive international education must include a study abroad component.

INTERNATIONAL ORIENTATION AND SENSITIVITY: A STUDY-ABROAD, DIRECT EXPERIENCE APPROACH

Direct experience abroad is arguably the most effective way to enable students to truly appreciate a host country's history, language, economy, politics, international relations, and other cultural aspects. Students can immerse themselves in an ancient Asian culture while experiencing a modern city. They participate in seminars and get first-hand information on government-sponsored campaigns regarding AIDS, literacy, and rural development. Another very valuable experience is an opportunity to interview top executives at some of the largest marketing, public relations, and advertising firms in Southeast Asia. Several of these firms are affiliates of multinational corporations. The implementation of this project, by going beyond a classroom discussion in the U.S. setting, offers direct experience overseas which should make students much more enthusiastic and active.

This paper describes a study-abroad short course at San Jose State University in San Jose, California. The program was designed to provide an opportunity for American students with limited means to learn first-hand about a vibrant and emerging market.

The objectives of the program focus on a number of international and educational activities. First, the project is a partnership with the Faculty of Mass Communications at Chulalongkorn University. Second, the project

involves the planning, development, and carrying out an international program to strengthen undergraduate and graduate instruction in public relations and advertising. Third, the project includes the activities that establish internship/study abroad opportunities for faculty and students at both institutions. The participating students have an opportunity to study public relations and advertising in Thailand in both the classroom and the business environments. Furthermore, experiences from this study abroad class can be helpful in designing future experiences in which Chulalongkorn students come on a similar trip to California.

Thailand is a desirable destination in Asia for a number of reasons: (1) Bangkok, the capital, is an international airline hub for all of Asia, (2) the nation is very modern with a good infrastructure for transportation, accommodations, and organized tourism, (3) it has a democratic government with good international relations, (4) the favorable exchange rate makes most products and services in Thailand very inexpensive, and (5) it is a favorite among international youth (backpackers) because of the culture, history, and friendliness of the Thai people. In fact, Thailand receives more international visitors than any other nation in Southeast Asia. It is important to note that Thailand is one of the world's fastest-growing economies during the last few decades.

Bangkok is the ideal location for a study-abroad program focusing on advertising, public relations, and marketing. It is the site of government ministries, national and

international advertising and public relations firms, and the headquarters of many national and multinational corporations. Some of the most creative advertisements in the world originate from the advertising agencies in Bangkok such as the global award winning Smooth E campaign.

CROSS-CULTURAL MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS: ELEMENTS OF THE COURSE

The title of the six-unit experimental course was “Cross-Cultural Marketing Communications in Southeast Asia.” The seminar course was designed to primarily attract students majoring in advertising, public relations, marketing, international business, history, and area studies. The course was taught jointly by San Jose State University and Chulalongkorn University faculty members. There was a close working relationship between American and Thai faculty to assure a significant cross-cultural experience. A major effort was made to have joint classes and seminars with Chulalongkorn and San Jose State students.

The program included daily field trips to advertising agencies, marketing firms, and government ministries. A unique and significant dimension of the course was the tapping of the leading professionals in the advertising, public relations, and marketing industry to give talks about their work and the industry in Thailand. This is a very rare and valuable opportunity for American students to interact with leading executives who are opinion leaders. These professionals are supplemented

by senior communications officials from the various government ministries who discuss various governmental information efforts in the areas of health, voting, literacy, AIDS, to improve the welfare of the Thai people. For example, the deputy governor of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) gave a briefing on how the country marketed itself for tourism and economic development. He described Thailand’s effort to cultivate a number of market segments (e.g., female tourists, medical tourists, spas and traditional massage, etc.). There was an interesting discussion of the economic and social impacts of the 2004 tsunami.

A SAMPLE BUSINESS VISIT TO BUMRUNGRAD INTERNATIONAL HOSPITAL

Students made a number of corporate visits and they were pleasantly surprised by being greeted and briefed by top executives, an unusual occurrence in the United States. Their visits to several advertising agencies and public relations firms (affiliated with well-known multinational corporations) revealed the creative and sophisticated operations of these agencies which could rival the very best in the world.

The faculty leaders were fortunate in successfully arranging a visit to Bumrungrad International Hospital (BI). BI has become the largest and most successful hospital in the world by being a pioneer in effective public relations and advertising. The hospital appears to be like a luxury hotel. It has Starbucks and McDonald’s on premise and

offers valet parking, guest chefs from 5-star hotels, and airport transportation. The hospital was recently featured on 60 Minutes, a top-rated TV program in the United States. On the day after the broadcast, it received some 3,000 e-mail inquiries from Americans seeking medical treatment. Bumrungrad's CEO was kind enough to talk in depth about the hospital's marketing strategies, and the students (half from Chulalongkorn and half from San Jose State) found his presentation to be very educational and enlightening.

EVALUATION OF PROGRAM

Students were required to keep an extensive daily journal regarding the content of lectures, seminars, field trips, etc. They were asked to do interpretative analysis and commentary on what they saw and heard. Students were also required to conduct research on a particular topic and write a comprehensive "term" paper.

The faculty leaders conducted an in-depth evaluation of the project by gathering information about the targeted constituents and their personal and professional developments. The data were cross-tabulated by behavioral responses and respondent demographics. The results offer a baseline for subsequent study-abroad groups. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. However, due to the small sample size, rigorous statistical methodologies were basically precluded.

One way to assess the success of the program is to measure the participating

students' degree of international sensitivity--before, during, and after the study tour. In the future, it is desirable to develop a measuring instrument to evaluate their international perspective in general and their sensitivity to the Thai culture and legal/political dimensions in particular. In this case, only a post-trip measurement was made. Still the responses clearly showed that the participating students were highly satisfied with the educational value and their personal as well as professional growth. In fact, every one of the participating students reported that they would strongly recommend this study abroad program to others and found it to be "a life changing experience."

Conceivably, a longitudinal follow-up study can be done after student graduations. The purpose is twofold. On the one hand, the study will determine whether the participating students have found their study-abroad experiences to be helpful in their professional careers--either directly or indirectly. On the other hand, the study will assess how these students have really changed--personally and socially. This dual assessment relies on a stated performance indicator by evaluating whether the project has succeeded in accomplishing the goals set.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of any international study program is to give students an opportunity to expand their knowledge in their field of study along with their understanding of other nations and cultures. While most universities today have some international aspects in the

curriculum (either as free-standing courses or as part of other courses), a study tour to another nation greatly enhances the internationalization of the curriculum. This hands-on approach gives students an exposure to a culture that few have ever had the opportunity to experience first-hand.

Upon completion of their study abroad class, students were able to verbalize their learning experiences and generally talk about how the trip had changed their perceptions or expanded their knowledge base. Ultimately, the goal is for students to advance beyond their national citizenships to also consider themselves good citizens of the world.



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