



Directing a Program Abroad

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Directing a Program

TWO VIEWS ON THE JUNIOR YEAR IN FRANCE

“It’s Like Wearing All the Hats”

BY JOHN C. O’NEAL

WHEN RELATIVES, FRIENDS, AND COLLEAGUES ask me what it is like to direct a program abroad, I tell them that it is like wearing all the hats in an institution, from those worn at the top by the president, dean, and admissions and financial officers to those worn at varying levels by academic advisers, psychological counselors, career planning staff workers, accountants, secretaries, repairmen, painters, and even janitors. An overseas program director is thus a jack of all trades except one, and that is the one in which he or she has the most training and experience—teaching. Rarely does the position allow teaching a course, unless the program has a full-time administrative assistant with expanded responsibilities. If one does teach at all, one spends less time on it than on anything else.

While asking their questions about this sort of work, my inquisitive interlocutors typically have a slight smile on their faces. In their minds, such a position is a sinecure that some even go so far as to call, mistakenly of course, a sabbatical. But directing an overseas program entails significant logistical, administrative, and individual challenges in addition to the many joys of a personal and professional nature it brings. On balance, it is a wonderful experience that is not without its dramatic moments.

The overseas program director faces a wide range of adminis-

trative responsibilities for which there is little prior training. Unpredictable problems can occur with the schools used, with the country’s bureaucracy, and with the students in the program, and the paperwork and decision making can be formidable. The assumption of stability and continuity may play treacherous tricks on even the veteran program director. What may have been true in 1986 may no longer be valid in 1990. The foreign school that previously never required an entrance exam of your students before letting them enroll in any class they wanted may now wish to appear selective and elitist and suddenly require testing. A general language and culture exam leading to an official certificate from the host country, for which no specific preparation had been necessary in the past, may now have a detailed reading list.

Bureaucracy in some foreign countries can take on Kafkaesque proportions. On my fifth trip to the police station this year for my temporary resident’s card, I regretted bitterly having tried six months earlier to engage a stone-faced state functionary in playful conversational banter. I had lightheartedly suggested that the presence of my program in France as an employer might help lessen the high unemployment rate in the country. My suggestion served only to complicate my situation, as I ruefully realized afterwards. The employees at the Préfecture de Police in Paris had difficulty finding an acceptable legal status for a program director; in their eyes, I was neither fish nor fowl. Nor have I forgotten the sheer panic I felt eight years ago when, because of the intransigence of a low-level administrator, my students had not

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Abroad



yet received this same card just days before the Christmas vacation—and they absolutely needed it to come back into the country after their vacation.

As for the students themselves, they can encounter or cause unforeseeable problems with their lodging, their habits, or even their health. The family that hosted a student one year and received an enthusiastic recommendation may not be appropriate for another student the next year. Some students complicate their transition to the foreign country with endless self-imposed dietary restrictions or an American sense of entitlement. Life in a foreign culture places great demands on all students. A few are psychologically unable to cope with their new environment and must be repatriated. Others can suddenly find themselves in hospitals for appendicitis, neglected infections, or serious injuries requiring surgery. Memories of emergencies or trying situations that have long been happily resolved still make me wary about predicting a carefree year as program director. In fact, I have sometimes jested that if I could ward off my worst disaster in the coming year as director by doing something harmful to myself, I would break my own leg.

The program director is also usually unprepared for the massive amount of paperwork that continuously crosses his or her desk. It dwarfs the number of occasional exams and compositions that normally pass through the same professor's hands on the home campus. Over time, this can become an avalanche of paper that one may be tempted to empty all too quickly into the wastepaper basket, foolishly discarding the unrecognizable form for the new tax the state has just levied on all employers. Such paperwork demands not great intelligence but constant attention to detail—which will try the patience of many a professor, especially those who tend to allow materials to pile up on their desks.

Living abroad equalizes directors and students in ways rarely attained on the home campuses. They wonder, tremble, laugh, and cry together.

When the end of May arrives and one's colleagues in the United States have finished their teaching duties, the overseas program director still has as much as another six weeks of work wrapping up final reports for grades, the end of the fiscal year, and the overall operation of the program.

Personal Joys...And Challenges

ON A PERSONAL LEVEL, THERE ARE CHALLENGES FOR the director's teaching and research, family, and sometimes even his or her well-being. Many of us miss the intellectual excitement of classroom teaching. Moreover, it is not always easy to carry out research in a foreign country. Our American libraries have given us high expectations for easy access; to

stacks, quick replies from interlibrary loan, and a host of other privileges and services that are not always allowed or available in foreign countries. But the major obstacle to doing research as a program director lies in the sheer amount of time that must be devoted to the countless duties of the job.

Family relations can sometimes be strained by a year overseas. Directors must leave their friends and relatives, as must their children, who do not always understand the necessity of such a separation. Conversely, it is painful to have one's older children remain in the United States later for their own college years or their jobs and families and not be able to gather for birthdays, anniversaries, or holidays. In times of turmoil and civil strife, living overseas can even become dangerous. In our first stay abroad, my family and I witnessed terrorism that touched the lives of people we knew. The next stay marked the Persian Gulf War and more terrorist threats. These are ugly and frightening times to be anywhere, but especially outside of one's native land. Not only have I feared for my family, but I also have feared for my students. The full responsibility and weight of the job are most keenly felt during tense moments such as these—unfortunately magnified many times over by sensationalist press coverage at home—when understandably anxious parents make transatlantic calls to the director about their children's safety.

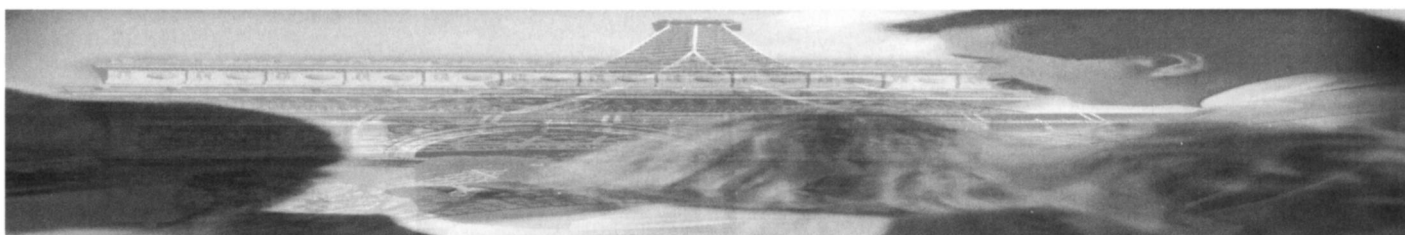
Living abroad as a program director, however, can be as enjoyable as it is challenging. It is not difficult to conjure up idyllic images of interesting, far-flung places around the globe such as Florence, Madrid, Paris, Oslo, Tokyo, or Saint Petersburg. Although life is not always as easy as others might imagine in these cities, program directors do benefit enormously from a rich cultural experience abroad. Language professors, who direct many of these programs, can re-immense themselves in the languages and cultures they teach. And offering one's children a bilingual and bicultural learning experience is a gift of inestimable value. A different way of living and a change in surroundings usually produce salutary results for all family members.

If there is a respite from teaching for directors, this does not necessarily remove them from their students, but may in fact draw directors and students together. Directors can share many experiences or feelings with their students: the awe upon arriving during a field trip at a site of great natural beauty or of prodigious human ingenuity; the mixture of fear and excitement (and possibly exasperation, too) during an organized, large-scale strike; the mirth in the presence of a full house of spectators laughing at the witty exchanges of actors on stage; and even the grief over tragic major events that may unfold suddenly and without warning. Living abroad equalizes directors and students in ways rarely attained on the home campuses. They wonder, tremble, laugh, and cry together. Not surprisingly, my most rewarding and lasting relationships with my students are formed during my years as their overseas studies director. It is also a pure delight to watch the remarkable progress students make linguistically and developmentally as young adults. Many of them later cite their overseas experience as being altogether crucial in the formation of their profound sense of themselves.

In addition to the personally satisfying aspects of directing a program, there are joys of a professional nature. Program abroad directors enjoy an important break from their teaching that allows them to return later to the classroom refreshed, stimulated, and ready to ply their newly replenished skills. Not unlike their students, directors can have their horizons expanded, too. Although few of us are trained as administrators, most of the work in the program director position is administrative, and as a chief administrator one inevitably makes important decisions. Making just and fair decisions that balance individual circumstances with the program's overall integrity leaves one feeling good about one's students and oneself. Similarly, when balancing the books for the first financial report of the year down to the sixth digit and the cents that come after

it, a director cannot help enjoying a sense of accomplishment.

Each time a director successfully finishes a task never before attempted or even expected of a college professor, he or she grows in self-confidence and professional stature. There are myriad ways for situations to spin out of control, so when order miraculously arises out of potential chaos, one experiences no uncertain relief. To put it in an old-fashioned way, directing an overseas program builds character no less than it instills faith in a providential hand that will spare the director from the kinds of disasters that can happen at any time. With success not only come the uplifting realization of personal achievement and an expansion of one's areas of competency, but also the humbling awareness of one's good fortune. ✍



“It’s *Not* a Sabbatical”

BY ROBERTA L. KRUEGER

THE TELEPHONE WOKE ME FROM A SOUND sleep well past midnight in Biarritz many years ago when I was in my first weeks of directing, for the first time, the orientation session of Hamilton College's junior year in France. “*Allô, Madame? C'est Jeff et j'ai une (sic) problème....*”

“Jeff” was phoning, panic-stricken, from a bar across the border in nearby San Sebastian, where he had just discovered that his passport was missing. Stolen? No, but gone, probably out of Spain by now. Earlier in the evening he had slipped the passport into the backpack of another student in the group for safe-keeping. But “Amy” had been dancing at the time, and he forgot to mention to her that he had entrusted her with his passport. Amy drifted off with friends and decided to return to Biarritz by an earlier train, little suspecting that she was carrying Jeff's passport. Jeff's geopolitical awareness sharpened as the night wore on. He now realized that crossing a national border

was a more serious affair than a road trip to a neighboring college and that, *sans passeport*, he wouldn't be able to return to France as planned. In light of the urgency of this matter, couldn't I, his director, track Amy down and somehow get his passport to the border so that he could re-enter the country in time for class this morning?

Needless to say, my training as a French medievalist had not prepared me for this particular situation, so I had to think, however groggily, on my feet. As exasperating as Jeff's phone call was, I was relieved that my first “crisis” was not a serious one. (The student waited until a decent hour to call Amy's host family, who graciously conveyed the passport to the student.) Nonetheless, this phone call illustrates how challenging directing a foreign study program can be for a faculty member.

Student problems arise when one is least prepared for them—very rarely, it seems, during “office hours.” And invariably the dilemma is of a sort one has never encountered before and, in some cases, is more complicated than one could possibly imagine. Fortunately, many situations that students per-

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ceive as emergencies find a blessedly comic resolution, as in Jeff's case. A program director's aim is to help the student figure out how to solve the problem, as I did when a student called in distress to complain that none of the Parisian taxis would stop for her at 8 a.m. But other predicaments are more vexing or perplexing, requiring the concerted efforts of student and director—tact, ingenuity, persistence, diplomatic skills, and a sense of humor. Medical or psychological emergencies require immediate and expert intervention by the appropriate agencies and are as distressing as if they happened to a family member. In these cases, the director must be prepared to do whatever is called for—to be present at the hospital for surgery on a broken leg—while keeping the home institution and the parents well informed about the situation. At these moments, directors feel poignantly their responsibility to provide students

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the support in all the ways that a vast array of student services staff at the home institution does.

The Devil's in the Details

UNLESS THE FACULTY MEMBER HAS SERVED PREVIOUSLY as a dean of students or is a trained psychologist, new directors will not be prepared for the many different duties they will be called upon to handle. Nor is the director's job limited to student services. The director is also the academic dean for the year in residence; he or she must oversee course offerings, visit classes, meet with teachers, and consult with colleagues at home about course changes and modes of evaluation, about recommendations for hiring and dismissing professors, about relations with foreign universities and special programs. To all these duties is added that of host during official visits from home institution administrators and colleagues, faculty members from affiliate colleges, and members of evaluating teams. Directors in exciting and accessible locations may also be unofficial hosts to a steady stream of relatives and friends.

The sheer volume of logistical details that must be mastered in any given morning, week, or month can overwhelm even the hardest-working faculty member. Furthermore, try as one might to work out the ideal schedule for a perfect year, a great number of elements such as university professors' schedules; strikes by students or transport or postal workers; the exchange rate; the weather; national politics—all of which affect the mood of a given academic year—are simply out of one's control. Faculty members who established relationships as personable teachers

with their students may feel initially awkward in their more formal role as administrators who must handle the logistics of course registration, housing accommodations, travel arrangements, financial problems, and student discipline. It can be disconcerting to replace the model of intellectual exchange between almost-equals with that of provider of services to customers who may not always appreciate one's best efforts.

Given all the demands on the director in residence, one may find oneself undergoing a temporary personality change as one struggles to seek out the best courses, have lunch with professors to discuss curricular issues, respond sympathetically and effectively to student problems, negotiate student identity cards with the Prefect of Police, balance the budget, and file reports at home in a timely fashion—all in a typical day. The intense, absorbing, and confidential nature of the foreign study directorship often creates a sense of isolation for the director, who may miss informal office hours with students and chats with colleagues at the photocopier. Students may not understand why their teacher—once so approachable and well-organized—seems more harried and apparently less "efficient" than at home, where all teachers' courses could be projected for semesters in advance and where nonacademic problems were handled by dozens of dedicated staff members. Directors may be frustrated by not being able to find the immediate ideal situation for every student every time.

The logistics of ferrying one's office to a foreign country and back on a regular basis also are daunting. Moving and re-installing one's computer system never transpires without a glitch, a lost file, a new transformer or cable. One invariably finds that the book or article one most needs is in the other language, in the other country, in the other office. It helps to have colleagues at home who understand your filing system, a supportive home-campus library, and, after one's return, colleagues abroad willing to do special favors.

Some colleagues at home will have little comprehension of the demands of the job and may regard the director's foreign travel and "free" time away with a certain longing. A returning director should be prepared for questions such as, "How was your sabbatical?" and "Did you finish your book last year?" After the year has ended, students and directors alike will experience some re-entry shock and may be surprised by their peers' lack of curiosity about their adopted culture. Returning directors may find it hard to plunge into the discussions of campus politics that so absorb their colleagues. Directors and students may well find themselves drawn together by their memories: the lunchtime language table or a reunion dinner may be a good means to share in the vividness of the experience among those who appreciate it best because they were there.

To engage in sustained scholarly activity while directing a foreign problem is a challenge, if not impossible. Although a major research library might be within walking distance, one's visits will most likely be infrequent and sporadic, especially at the beginning of each semester. The afternoon scheduled for research may well be occupied by an emergency session with a student or by a meeting with a university administrator or with

the housing cooperative. During a rare afternoon off, it can be hard to erase students' personal concerns and administrative matters from one's operating system.

Hence, one must learn to tailor one's projects to the circumstances: the year abroad is not the year to write a book, but it is an excellent opportunity to renew contacts with foreign colleagues and enlist their scholarly advice, to attend university seminars and regional conferences, to frequent bookstores and read foreign periodicals. Yet the year does not substitute for an academic leave. If faculty members intend to make foreign directing a regular part of their career, long-term planning will be necessary to maintain an active and realistic research program. Foreign program directors will find that "real" academic leaves are even more necessary as a means to recover time lost in the transition.

Family Matters

ONE OF THE MOST DEMANDING AND SATISFYING aspects of directing a foreign program is the translocation of one's household and family to a foreign culture on a periodic basis. Try as we might to travel light and simplify logistics, the move itself has never been less than completely disruptive in my family. Even if you have been fortunate to line up excellent child care or enrollment in a fine school, most children will pass through several months of linguistic and cultural transition in which parental love and support will be needed in vast doses. (This period, of course, is the same one in which the students most require the director's attention.) Children who are attending a foreign language school will need parental tutoring in English if they are to keep up with their grade level at home. When they return to the States, they will benefit from a teacher who understands that their pace in reading and spelling may be slower at first. Adolescent children approaching college entrance may find that a bilingual school with a strong component of English instruction is their best bet—providing such a school is available in their location.

Another source of domestic concern is the employment of the director's spouse, who may or may not be able to arrange a year's leave from and return to his or her American job (and whose income in either case will be lost), or who may incur considerable expenses in relocating. Some families may assess these elements in advance, decide that directing in a given year would be inadvisable, and elect to postpone or delay their "turn," as we did when contemplating taking our ten-year-old daughter and twin two-year-old boys this upcoming year. (At age three, the boys will be out of diapers and can attend the local public *école maternelle*.)

In departments that share direction, colleagues must juggle their professional and family schedules to work out the timing of their respective residencies. Although some times are clearly unsuitable, there is probably no ideal time for family residence abroad. I have known families with young children of various ages, families with teenagers, a director whose spouse and teenagers remained in the States, a director with a young child whose spouse commuted from another foreign city, a director

whose stateside parents were seriously ill, a director whose spouse had to return home for medical treatment—all of whom had their share of joys and trying moments. Given that every kind of family complication is more complicated when one is moving between cultures, it helps to have an administration that is as supportive as possible about easing the domestic strains.

Impact on the Home Institution

A FOREIGN PROGRAM AFFECTS NOT ONLY THE INDIVIDUAL faculty member, but also the whole department. The small department will feel more acutely than the larger department the continual absence of one member of the group. When periodic leaves of faculty members are added to the time spent away directing, departments may find it difficult to have any moment when all members can be in the same place at the same time. Good communication throughout the year is essential; the department must consult the resident director on all important policy matters, and the resident director must do likewise. Electronic mail and the fax have immeasurably improved the ease and frequency of communications.

Departments must decide how the timing of direction will be made; some groups may find themselves with several people eager to go in the same year; others may have difficulty persuading their own members (particularly those with children or working spouses) to direct and may turn to other colleges or universities to share the responsibility.

Finally, the work of the program director does not end when he or she returns to campus. A successful program demands not only hard work during the year abroad, but also continual and concerted efforts on the home campus. Since many of the students in foreign study programs are not, or are not exclusively, foreign language majors, directors must maintain close contact

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with colleagues in other departments and at other schools. What courses can the foreign program offer that would enhance the on-campus major? What special needs or requirements do non-language majors have in their junior year? How effective has the foreign experience been as preparation for the senior year? How can the aims of the related major and the foreign study program be best coordinated? At a time when departments compete for dwindling resources, foreign study directors must be energetic, articulate promoters of their programs. Directors will find themselves highly involved in making personnel and policy decisions, visiting other campuses, advising students planning to travel abroad and those who have returned, planning budgets, attend-

ing send-off receptions, and answering academic questions from prospective students. This administrative and conceptual work of directors at home is probably the most "invisible" work to colleagues and administrators who have not directed such a program. Yet, without a major on-campus commitment from all directors on campus and off, no program will survive.

This description of the faculty member's role as a resident and ongoing director may seem overly negative to those who have never held the responsibility, but I hope it will seem realistic to those who have. Despite all the difficulties and frustrations of running a foreign study program, the benefits to faculty members of well-supported programs can be enormous, for one's teaching, one's departmental life, and one's scholarship. First, one can learn to be an administrator and an educator simultaneously by making the "solution" to a student's

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predicament a lesson in language, culture, and personal responsibility. Our students are always learning in the foreign environment, and, as directors, we are providing linguistic information and logistical services as well as a model of intercultural relations, tact, resilience, and humanity. Our greatest rewards are not only to observe the immense linguistic progress and cultural sophistication that our students attain during the year, but above all to witness their growth in interpersonal sensitivity, self-reliance, and maturity. All directors have fond "before" and "after" memories of students whose personal growth was remarkable. One student (who initially wanted to return home at Thanksgiving) was so positively enhanced in self-confidence that her mother did not immediately recognize her at the airport on her return. Time and again, students report to their directors that the year abroad was their most formative undergraduate year. There is no greater privilege than sharing this year with students.

The rewards to departments and institutions of having such students return as seniors are no less great. It is true that a strong contingent of juniors on campus is lost and that home institution enrollments will be lower; and, if students attend programs other than those sponsored by the institution, tuition revenues will be lost. Careful screening of students who study abroad and of the programs in which they participate is necessary to ensure that the study abroad experience will be academically viable and will justify the institutional expense. But, if cultural understanding is one of our goals, then there is no doubt that the successful foreign study experience furthers it immeasurably. Students return as linguistically competent, socially aware, and intellectually mature individuals. Seminars in the target language are filled

with articulate, enthusiastic participants. These students, in turn, provide excellent role models for first- and second-year students, who may well be encouraged to continue language study beyond the intermediate level in order to attain the impressive proficiency of the returnees. In other majors, the returning senior can undertake a sophisticated thesis that incorporates materials learned abroad.

Faculty members and departments benefit from the director's frequent contact with the foreign culture. Regular rotation of several faculty members to the foreign culture enriches classroom instruction on the home campus by refreshing nonnative speakers of the language and by allowing all teachers to update their archives of cultural materials. For native speakers, the foreign program serves as an important time "at home," an opportunity to renew family ties, bring children into contact with their relatives, and reinforce their linguistic skills. In the domain of scholarship, although the obstacles might seem daunting, directing a foreign study program can have a positive effect on one's long-term scholarship and learning. Trips to archives, meetings with foreign colleagues, university seminars, as well as renewed contact with the linguistic and cultural field of one's teaching will enhance one's professional life. Even a modest schedule of such scholarly events, when planned over a year's time, adds up to a considerable benefit. One must learn to set realistic expectations

about one's plans for the year: an overly ambitious program will be frustrating, but total inactivity will be equally depressing. Ultimately, one learns to take a larger view of the humanistic enterprise and to appreciate (as we do with our students) growth in personal maturity and in cultural understanding broadly defined. To this end, directors should make a special effort to keep abreast of the current cultural scene and attend special exhibits, concerts, plays, or other local events (only former directors will understand why we must remind ourselves to do this); although this may seem to require a superhuman effort of will when one is exhausted at the week's end, one is invariably refreshed by the experience.

In short, the foreign study directorship can be one of the most challenging and rewarding aspects of a faculty member's professional life. A few essential prerequisites bear repeating. First, one must have an eager, qualified group of students with the linguistic capacity and the personal maturity to benefit from the year. Secondly, one's personal maintenance system, family arrangements, and research plans must be reasonably favorable before one embarks on what promises to be an extremely demanding year. Third, one must have strong institutional support. Expert assistance with administrative and secretarial tasks, the advice and encouragement of co-directors, the sympathetic collaboration of supportive administrators, adequate compensation, and help with travel and living arrangements are all essential. Finally, every new or returning director would be well served by a sense of adventure, a desire for complexity, and a love of the unforeseen. Armed with these qualities and expectations, the director of a foreign study program will not be disappointed, at home or abroad. ☞