

ALTERNATIVE  
MODELS FOR  
RESIDENT  
DIRECTORSHIPS  
ABROAD

# Rotating Faculty *or* Permanent Resident Directors?

*Four experts weigh the relative advantages and drawbacks of two fundamentally different approaches to directing academic programs abroad.*

BY RICHARD E. STRYKER, AL BALKCUM,  
PETER A. WOLLITZER, AND INES DEROMANA

International educators face conflicting objectives in determining on-site systems for administering their academic-year and semester programs abroad. Those of us who have experienced different types of resident directorships, whether as providers or consumers, probably have strong preferences between the polar models of *permanent resident directors* and *rotating faculty directors*, though both involve significant tradeoffs. This article describes these alternative models and some of their inherent compromises. Based on our experience in this field, we propose a series of ideas to maximize the potentials in each arrangement, and suggest some modifications in each to improve the balance of advantages. (*Summer and short-term programs, a different phenomenon, are addressed in a separate article—see page 32.*)

## Pros and Cons

At its best, the permanent resident director (PRD) provides strong administrative efficiency with continuity and consistency over time, and abundant cultural and practical savvy. These advantages serve students on the program well, and aid the home office, which doesn't have to train novices each year with long learning curves.

At its worst the PRD becomes set in his/her ways over time, treating the job as a sinecure, knowing the program better than anyone else, and controlling information about it so that changes are blocked, new ideas are stymied, and the central office's administrative task becomes how to terminate the PRD, with attendant legal, financial, and disruption costs.

At its best the rotating faculty director (RFD) provides the recurrent stimulus of new leadership energy on site, constantly renewing the linkages between home cam-

pus faculty and the program abroad, ensuring that the academic values and purposes of the home campus are represented on site, and creating a pool of committed and knowledgeable faculty for student recruitment, orientation, and program evaluation.

At its worst an RFD can be a faculty member seeking respite from the rigors of duties at home, or perhaps a year abroad to finish a book, who leaves the program in the hands of assistants who in turn assume the characteristics of the worst PRD, without the academic or administrative standing of a director. Because faculty are rarely trained or valued for their administrative capabilities at home, the learning curve of PRDs abroad is always steep; even the best-intentioned are often at sea and sometimes abandon ship along the way. Administrative time spent working with such faculty may come at the expense of student development and of the program itself.

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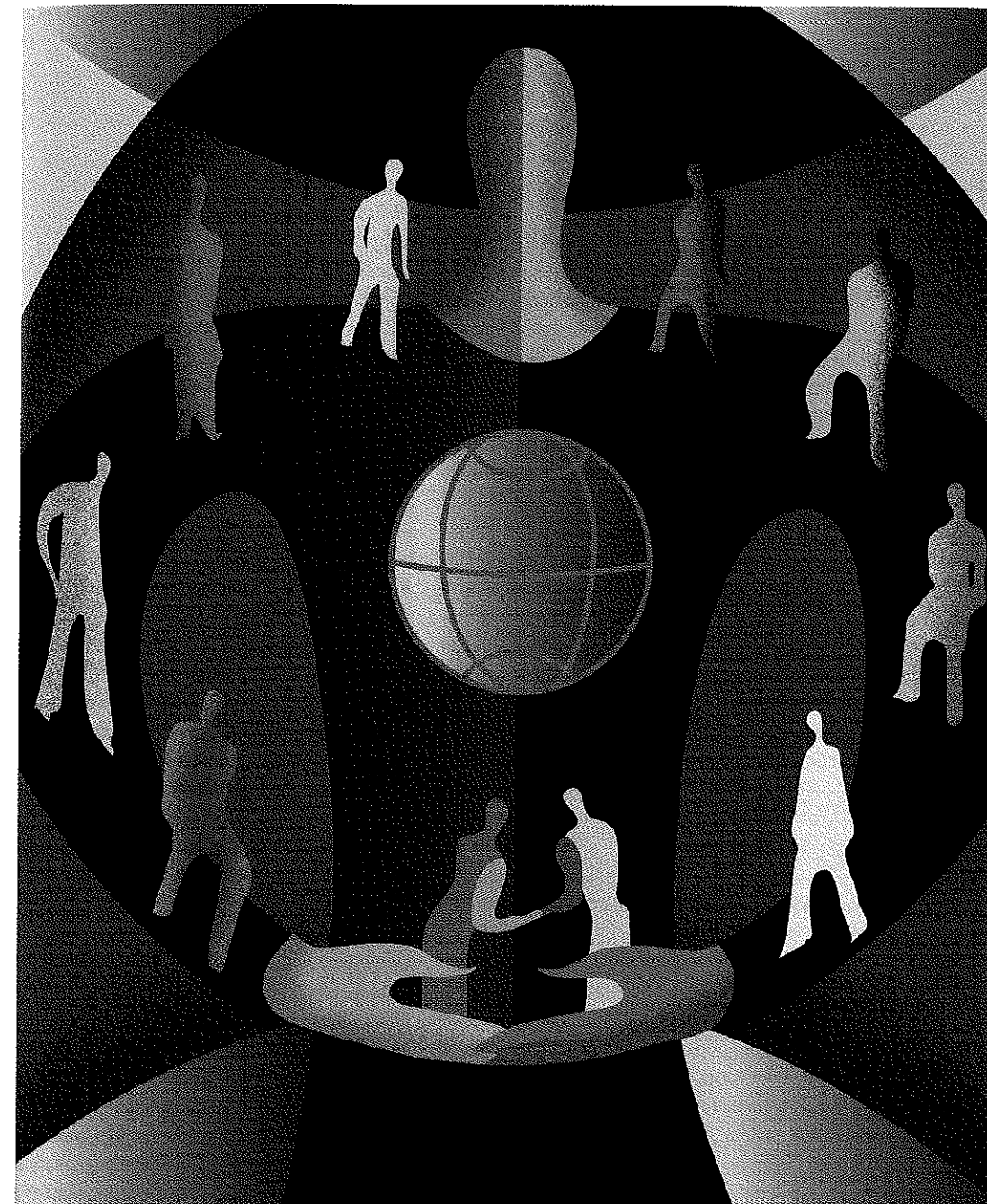
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Sergio Baradry/Stock Illustration Source

Each of these models, with its respective pros and cons, merits a closer individual look.

### Permanent Resident Directors

Institutions interested in sending students overseas on their own programs have long developed and managed a multitude of faculty-led study abroad opportunities. Many of these programs have minimal on-site academic or administrative support. The study abroad office contracts with vendors and agencies for housing, classroom

space, excursions, guest speakers, and other particulars, with an annually rotating faculty leader carrying large checks or cash to cover all or most of the program expenses. For many of these programs the faculty leader is the academic and administrative director, adviser, counselor, parent, banker, and more. Over time, and with growing demand for more programs, many of these same institutions have encountered difficulties finding faculty who are willing to leave campus for a full term to lead such programs abroad.

In addition, even for those institutions where home faculty continue to act as resident directors, increasing difficulties in management demand more resources and staff time from the study abroad office. Necessity often forces home offices and their institutions to seek out other means, such as sending adjunct faculty or advanced graduate students to conduct programs abroad that they can still label as their own.

A better solution is to hire permanent resident directors (PRDs) on-site to manage program activities. In this model, the home campus faculty still have an important role to play, but it is one of academic oversight rather than tending to the direct needs of students abroad. The PRD model, outlined below, is one of the preferred arrangements that many institutions employ today to manage their own study abroad programs.

### The Ideal PRD

While there are numerous variations to the PRD model, in our experience there are many characteristics that are common to the most successful approaches. Our recommendations follow below.

The PRD should have both reporting and salary lines located in the unit that is fiscally responsible for the program. In most institutions, this will be the study abroad office. Joint appointments seldom work and have the potential for ongoing management and supervision headaches. If possible, it is also valuable for the PRD to hold adjunct faculty/teaching status in the home campus department with the most

academic stake in the program. This maintains a valuable academic linkage between the program and faculty at the home institution. These lines should be clear and mutually agreed upon by the units involved.

If the study abroad program is formally affiliated with a host institution (e.g., integrated classes at the host institution are offered as part of the program), then the PRD should ideally hold adjunct faculty/teaching status at the host institution. In most circumstances, it is preferable that the director not be a regular faculty member at the host institution, as complications may arise with both time and commitment to the program. However, faculty status can prove very important in such tasks as determining appropriate classes for students, mediating on behalf of students for grades, and providing access to classes.

The PRD should reside permanently in the host city where the program is located. However, he/she should return to the home campus annually for a carefully planned visit. During these visits, the director should spend time both in the study abroad office and the department responsible for

academic oversight for the program. These visits should help provide the PRD with a clear picture of the operations of the study abroad office, maintain linkages with faculty and appropriate department(s), and provide a forum for discussions about the program with staff and faculty.

### **Advantages of the PRD**

There are a number of advantages in this model. The most obvious advantage to employing a PRD is the consistency of on-site operations from year to year. Over time, the study abroad office comes to know what to expect from the PRD, providing a level of confidence that allows the program to grow and prosper. (By contrast, one of the most frustrating characteristics of the rotating faculty model is the fact that each year is different from the last, reflecting the differing strengths and weakness of the RFDs.)

A PRD knows the site and the local infrastructures of the host community. The director's knowledge of the rules and vagaries of public transportation, local cultural institutions, and the significance of local history and politics—to say nothing of how

the host university really works—all contribute the quality of a student's study abroad experience.

In addition, a PRD knows and is known by other locals as a friend and neighbor. This enables the director to establish an ongoing network of support for the program that takes maximum advantage of the cultural as well as academic potential of the site. A director's established relationships with bankers, police and government officials, real estate brokers, physicians, pharmacists, and social service agencies—and knowing how and when to contact them to get something done—are extremely valuable program assets.

Out of such local connections come opportunities for establishing internships, service learning and volunteer experiences, home stays, and similar chances for immersion in local culture. Also, as a local resident, the director will be aware of changes in health, safety, and legal and liability issues that are relevant to the program.

The importance of a PRD having faculty standing cannot be overstated. With that status, a PRD has improved access to ongoing information about faculty, courses, classrooms, and events on campus, as well as first-hand knowledge of impending difficulties (campus strikes, for example, or potential strife from elections). Faculty status gives the director peer-to-peer access to host faculty and administrators, often resulting in better assistance to students in resolving questions concerning grades, exams, requirements, and other academic issues. The PRD's faculty status may also facilitate obtaining course schedules, syllabi, or curriculum vitae as needed with regard to obtaining home campus credit for students, and assistance to the home institution in further developing the program.

Finally, having a PRD makes it easier to retain a program history, using the experience gained from previous years to improve things that work and avoid repeating the same mistakes.

### **Disadvantages of the PRD**

While the PRD model has many advantages, it also has a number of potential problems.

Local laws governing employment, salaries, and social benefits are complicated and vary greatly from country to country,

## **MAKING THE PRD MORE EFFECTIVE**

There are a number of measures that the study abroad office can take that will avoid the potential problems listed above and help Permanent Resident Directors (PRDs) to be more effective in their job:

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- ▶ Wherever possible, the PRD should have the authority to speak for the home campus. When decisions require a response from the home campus, they should always be forthcoming in a timely manner.
- ▶ Bring the director to the home campus often. Make good use of their visits by arranging for them to get to know staff and faculty and make them aware of the policies and procedures that impact the program.
- ▶ Keep the directors linked (via e-mail, fax, and phone) with the home campus, so that they are kept aware of what is happening in the study abroad office as well as the rest of the institution.
- ▶ Arrange for staff and faculty to visit the program and meet with the director as frequently as possible. Ensure that visits are well planned and urge that visitors consider the program and its problems from the perspective of the PRD.
- ▶ Link the PRD with directors from other programs, and if possible create a network among local staff so that they can share objectives, methods, and solutions to problems.
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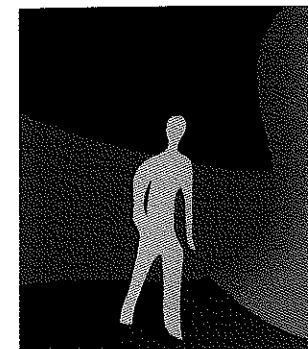
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even city to city within the same country. Being and staying in compliance with the law requires that the institution retain local legal counsel, which is costly. This tends to be less problematic if the director is hired as an employee of the home institution, rather than as a private contractor.

Without careful attention, use of this model over a long period of time may result in a gradual erosion of faculty and department support for the program. It is imperative that the study abroad office keep faculty and departments interested in and supportive of the program by involving them in meaningful academic oversight. This may include establishing a program faculty advisory committee to oversee academic issues, regularly scheduled and well-planned site visits by appropriate faculty, a role in selecting students for the program and reviewing their progress, and a say in program evaluations.

One of the most difficult issues for the study abroad office is how to keep the PRD aware of what is happening on the home campus (e.g., student and faculty characteristics, changes in academic and administrative culture, policies, and procedures that affect the program). It is a challenge to ensure that home campus staff and on-site staff consider program problems and issues from each other's perspective. Without careful management, lack of mutual understanding can place the students and the program in an awkward position.

Related to this last issue is the isolation from the home campus that the PRD faces much of the time. Unlike staff in the study abroad office, the director is not in a position to walk into a home institution colleague's office to discuss problems and issues that are of immediate concern. Without frequent contact through site visits,

phone calls, and e-mail PRDs may develop the feeling that they are on their own and without support from the home institution.

#### Rotating Faculty Directors

The traditional model used by U.S. universities to supervise their continuing international study programs overseas is a one- or two-year rotating appointment, normally made from among the ranks of regular, usually tenured, home-university faculty. In principle, faculty members who serve in the capacity of rotating faculty director (RFD) abroad are selected from among qualified applicants based on such criteria as knowledge of and experience in the host country, culture, and university; language ability, if applicable; demonstrated interest and success in undergraduate teaching and advising; good rapport with students; understanding of and commitment to international education; knowledge of the home university's administrative and academic policies; demonstrated administrative ability; and the ability to teach a course at the host university in a designated field of study. Implicit in the criteria is the assumption that the candidate for director can simultaneously play the role of mother, father, diplomat, dean, department chair, friend, teacher, inspirer, counselor, disciplinarian, pastor, doctor, and lawyer.

Universities have developed other models for on-site supervision of international programs, particularly over the last decade as professional and family demands at home, as well as the nature of the overseas director's position, have evolved. However, many faculty and some administrators continue to believe that the rotating faculty directorship, particularly the two-year variety, is the gold standard to which all

programs should aspire. Indeed, recalling a 1993 survey conducted by Indiana University, fully 86 percent of the former RFDs responding favored this model (U.S. faculty member serving a one- or two-year term) over any form of permanent resident directorship abroad.

Why is there such loyalty to the traditional RFD model, particularly among faculty? Some answers may be gleaned from a discussion of the advantages of the RFD model as described above, even as we acknowledge some of its serious shortcomings.

#### The Ideal RFD

Before examining the advantages of the traditional RFD model of on-site international program administration, let us explore some of the structural and procedural elements that typically contribute to its success.

In an ideal situation, the RFD works closely with a permanent, knowledgeable academic administrator or team at the home university, a resource capable of providing not only comprehensive training to the newly selected RFD but also periodic on-site support grounded in institutional memory and a knowledge of the strategic direction of a program. Programs that lack such a strong, permanent base of administrative continuity and control at home are fundamentally weaker.

It is also desirable for an RFD to work closely with permanent program staff abroad. Such staff members can bring professional international education experience to the operation of a program, complementing the faculty member's typical experience grounded in an academic discipline and department. Permanent staff assure an uninterrupted base of local knowledge, including host institution culture, contacts,

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and areas of sensitivity. A permanent staff has the advantage of gaining and retaining knowledge of logistical successes and failures from year to year, so the program has a better chance of repeating its successes rather than its failures in orientation, housing, home stays, and field trips.

When an RFD operates in these circumstances, he or she is freed to concentrate on the essential functions that an academic of the home university can best, perhaps uniquely, provide. These include the continuing assessment and enhancement of the academic program; knowing the special value of the host learning environment for students of the home university; student academic advising from the perspective of the home university; supplying relevant academic course information to the home university; academic authority in such matters as student performance, grade translation, grade disputes, etc.; periodic teaching and guest lecturing; and authoritative on-site representation to the host university and local officials.

Finally, in an ideal situation, the RFD would be so inspired by the rewarding experience of helping open the eyes of home university students to the broader world around them that she would ask to extend her assignment in the host country. The program then stands to benefit considerably because the RFD can apply what she has learned from her in-depth training in the first year to improve the program before returning home.

When a two- or even three-year term is not possible, some of the same advantages can still accrue if the departing RFD remains actively involved in the program through such home campus mechanisms as advisory committees, review committees, selection panels, orientation sessions, or through periodically recurring appointments abroad every few years.

#### **Advantages of the RFD**

The foremost advantage of using one's own home university faculty to direct programs abroad is the ability to involve and engage them in the program and enhance program credibility in faculty eyes. An engaged home university faculty is most often a highly supportive faculty. Moreover, an engaged and knowledgeable home faculty is arguably better motivated and better able

to help incorporate the unique learning possibilities available at the host site into the curriculum at home. Some program experimentation has been reported in which home university classrooms are linked via satellite or Internet with classrooms abroad, with students on both sides cooperating in comparative research.

Enhanced prospects for joint faculty research initiatives may comprise a corollary advantage of posting one's own faculty abroad. While research is not the objective of most international study programs, the meaningful linkage of host and home university faculty does tend to pay dividends in terms of overall faculty commitment to and durability of a partnership.

Generating respect among host university faculty and administrators for the significance of a program is another reason that a sending university may want to post its own faculty to the study site abroad. This is not an assured advantage, of course, because much depends upon the quality of the person sent and his or her performance at the host university. Still, the authority of the home institution and its seriousness of purpose are generally well represented to a partner abroad by senior members of the faculty spending blocks of time at the host university, particularly when they offer a course or otherwise contribute actively to the institution's intellectual life.

Cooptation of an RFD by entrenched interests at a host university is usually, but not always, more difficult than in the case of a PRD. It is for this reason, for example, that governments usually rotate Foreign Service personnel every few years; periodic rotation tends to prevent people from getting too cozy with their hosts. Because PRDs are usually also permanent colleagues to their host university counterparts, and because generally they share the same local community, it can be difficult at critical times for them to forcefully represent the best interests of the home university.

In principle, an RFD is less beholden to the host and can risk taking a harder line when it is necessary to do so for the good of the program. On the other hand, every sending university has had the experience of its own faculty who are native to the host country falling quickly into old cultural patterns of behavior that may not serve the best interests of the program they represent.

The rotation of directors, when done in a way that allows them to concentrate on academic program elements, has every chance to bring fresh perspectives and ideas into a program on a regular basis. This can be a significant advantage over repeating the same tried-and-true but perhaps stale approach year in and year out.

If the disciplines represented by successive RFD's also vary, there is the added potential advantage of broadening the range of majors that regularly participate in the program. For example, an RFD who is a biologist is likely to be motivated to explore the possible fit and perhaps develop interesting links between the home and host biology curricula, whereas it would be a rare humanist or social scientist who would do so, and vice versa.

Advising home university students abroad about the academic policies of the home school and how these may or may not accommodate specific academic coursework during the sojourn abroad should be a further strength of the RFD model; this is not because of the rotation per se but rather because the adviser in this case is an active home university faculty member. By the same token, in arrangements where reciprocal student exchange is involved, an RFD can be a valuable resource for giving on-site advice to potential exchange students about the partner university they plan to attend. In some cases RFDs are asked to interview reciprocity applicants to help assess suitability for the exchange.

Finally, other advantages accrue in most cases once the RFD has rotated back to the home campus. Returned RFDs generally become willing resources to help recruit students for the program, offer academic advice, and provide assistance with pre-departure orientation. While some PRDs also accomplish such tasks by making recruitment or orientation visits at strategic times of year, the continuing presence of returned faculty directors on campus means that this important resource is readily available. Returned RFDs are often eager to lead or serve on program review committees, advise about program improvement proposals, participate on search committees, or assist with ad hoc program-related projects. They also form a natural interest and talent pool upon which the home university may draw in future recruiting.

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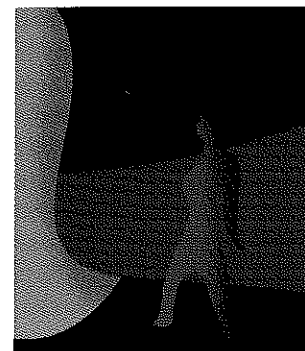
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While the university-based third-party providers may find the debate in this article relevant, it is worth noting that there appears to be a high correlation between expanding programming to attract students beyond the home school and shifting to the PRD model.

#### Disadvantages of the RFD

The RFD model has many potential disadvantages that are readily apparent when comparing the two models. Many of its weaknesses are essentially the converse of its strengths. A brief list follows.

First, there is the risk of excessive program fluctuation from year to year, with changes in course or character depending on the personality and predilections of individual RFDs. While such annual program variations may be desirable for certain kinds of short-term faculty-led programs, permanent programs cannot easily withstand the whipsaw effect of strongly differing priorities and styles among rotating directors.

If RFDs rather than home university administrators are charged with on-site contract negotiations, there is a risk of their becoming embroiled in contentious issues that can impair good working relations at the host university and detract from the essential academic rationale for having faculty serve abroad.

In cases where frequent RFD turnover is the norm, programs may suffer from a lack of continuity and on-site experience. The effects of having to cope continually with changing RFDs can be debilitating, as can the pressure of having to continually train new RFDs. There is obvious potential for conflict between the RFD and experienced, senior staff abroad on whom the program depends year after year. A new boss each year or two, especially where he or she is typically a novice and the senior resident staff is the repository of most program intelligence (which may or may not be shared willingly) is a structural problem that can undermine all of the virtues of the RFD model.

There is always the risk of making a poor RFD selection due to home university poli-

tics rather than on solid candidate qualifications and program needs.

It is an inherent weakness of the RFD position that the individual is, by definition, an outsider at the host university.

Higher costs are associated with continual recruitment, retraining, and relocation; short-term housing; international school tuition for dependent children; and immigration complications (for example, Green Card holders must return every six months to protect their U.S. immigration status). Also, there can be difficulties in finding qualified, available candidates due to dual income financial exigencies, family considerations, and risks to tenure or advancement.

#### Some Conclusions

We have approached these alternative models primarily from the perspective of major universities that organize their own study abroad programs. There is another type of educational actor, however, whose perspective needs to be added here: colleges and universities that do not administer their own longer-term programs abroad for the most part but work through third-party providers. The latter has developed into a highly variegated category, which includes universities with programs open to students outside the home school, study abroad institutions affiliated with universities (e.g., Butler and Arcadia), and a growing number of non-degree granting nonprofit institutions that specialize in organizing study abroad programs (e.g., IES, CIEE).

While the university-based third-party providers may find the debate in this article relevant, it is worth noting that there appears to be a high correlation between expanding programming to attract students beyond the home school and shifting to the

PRD model. The non-university external providers rely, out of necessity, on PRDs since they have no faculty of their own.

The arguments in favor of PRDs rather than RFDs are generally more persuasive to study abroad administrators working with external providers. These administrators especially value the stability of Resident Directors and overseas staff who work with sending institutions over time and become familiar with their student profiles, academic expectations, and policies. Their confidence in recommending programs is highly dependent on their perceptions of continuity in program personnel and procedures and therefore in the quality of student services, academic standards, and crisis management.

Indeed, the tragic events of September 11 and the continuing international insecurities we all confront underscore the importance of recruiting and retaining strong and experienced Resident Directors and staff on all of our programs abroad. The debate over alternative directorship models will continue, however, in part because high-quality and reliable personnel are scarce resources to find and retain anywhere; and in part because of the unique character of this pivotal position in study abroad, which requires tending to both home and host demands and perspectives.

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