

The Forum on Education Abroad – European Conference

Reinventing the European Experience: Culture, Politics and Diversity in U.S. Education Abroad
December 5-7th, 2012 – Dublin, Ireland

The Forum on Education Abroad's first European conference was an enriching opportunity to dialogue with colleagues from Europe and the United States. The various speakers and presenters offered insights into their on-site experience and the cultural and historical richness of Europe and particularly Ireland as study abroad destinations. Both the moving personal stories of Irish President Michael D. Higgins at the welcome reception and plenary speaker Colin Ireland's detailed defense of Ireland as an unexpected location to learn about the effects of colonization helped the conference attendees reexamine what our own study abroad locations have to offer American students today.

I attended five sessions by European and American colleagues, the first of which was *Integration of Community-Based Learning Pedagogy to Promote Student Engagement and Learning in Local Study Abroad Context: A Dublin Case Study*. The team of U.S. and Dublin-based staff from the University of Notre Dame as well as a host site representative presented their effective model for using community-based learning to help integrate students into the Dublin community and teach modern Irish history. Their team-based approach included screening and developing each student's individual service project pre-departure, working to find a placement that fit the project on-site, and connecting the student's experience to coursework in Irish history and sociology. The results, both in terms of student engagement, cultural immersion, impact on future student coursework and positive impact on the Irish community, were very successful. While they recognized that their model did not involve the same challenges that programs in non-English speaking countries encounter, the concept of preparing students and having them research and develop their individual projects pre-departure would be helpful for bridging the gap between home and any host country and would most likely positively impact student engagement on-site. Connecting the volunteer experience to a history seminar would also be particularly effective.

The second session I attended was *Mind the Gap! How do Programme Provider Arrival Orientations Fit into the Orientation Process? Are they a Value-added Component of a Study Abroad Programme or an Unnecessary Evil?* The response to the question posed in the session title was a resounding yes, and the University of California and IFSA-Butler staff provided useful numbers gleaned from study surveys to this effect. While many institutions are considering eliminating on-site arrival orientations to lower program costs, students and on-site staff agree that this is an essential part of helping students to adapt to the host location and institution that cannot be replaced by pre-departure orientation sessions online or in person. Surveys showed that students found on-site orientation to be particularly helpful in the areas of academics, health and safety, practicalities, culture and language and for creating bonds with staff and other students. Students also indicated that they did not feel they were being over-oriented, but rather a traditional two day orientation period with additional cultural and social activities in the days following corresponded to their needs, desires, and expectations. Students welcome the honest, practical advice of on-site staff and found it to be integral to adapting to their host culture.

The third session I attended was *Towards Virtual Study Abroad? Can Digital and Social Media Augment the "Grand Tour"?* This session was primarily theoretical, and presented two online tools that had been used in study abroad contexts, Hypercities, a collaborative digital media platform that layers maps to allow students to "time travel" in the places they are studying, and video footage created by German-language students as a resource for language instruction. Unfortunately this session lacked cohesiveness but did acknowledge positive and negative aspects of integrating technology into the study abroad experience: while it can enhance the experience, it cannot replace the physical experience of being in a specific place.

The fourth session I attended was *Europe as a Catalyst for Intercultural Learning*. This session addressed the challenges facing host country staff today, as student profiles change and financial pressure forces programs to accept larger numbers of students with weaker backgrounds in language and culture. American students no longer perceive Europe as being significantly different from their home culture and thus culturally challenging, which can be a barrier to promoting intercultural learning. Shorter program lengths also allow less time for real adaptation and immersion to occur. Several methods for encouraging cultural awareness and adaptation were addressed, such as Raymonde Carroll's methodology and Thiagi's Six-Point De-Brief. A superb example of an online intercultural learning course from the University of Minnesota, offered parallel to the study abroad experience, was also demonstrated. This course helped students connect the dots before, during, and after their time abroad and forced them to reflect more deeply on their experience.

The fifth and final session I attended was *Team Work to Support Students with Psychological Disabilities*. This particularly effective session used concrete examples of home institution and on-site staff working together and with insurance providers to help students with psychological disabilities complete successful study abroad experiences. Next, the attendees addressed specific case studies and walked through concrete steps to handle cases such as eating disorders, depression, suicidal tendency, and sexual assault. This session was particularly useful for learning to identify telltale signs of student issues and developing the reflex to involve home institution staff, on-site staff, and local medical services to effectively assist students with psychological disabilities.

The only negative point to make about the conference was the prevalence of case studies from programs located in English language speaking countries. Despite the wide array of colleagues presenting from non-English speaking countries, the conference location itself increased a tendency to focus on situations that do not necessarily present the additional challenges APUAF members face in France due to the language barrier. This reinforces the importance of continuing to exchange and organize workshops among APUAF members to address topics most relevant to us in France. The impression I received from all French conference participants, however, was that the conference was extremely useful and that we would all be thrilled to see the Forum continue to host a European conference in the future.