

Study Abroad

Developments in Argentina and Chile: the effects of privatization, and other thoughts

by Joan Solaun

Having just returned from a long visit to Latin America, checking our study abroad programs, I'd like to share some observations related to opportunities for U.S. students in Argentina and, briefly, in Chile.

Now that the National Security Educational Program scholarship funds are focusing on non-traditional study abroad sites, Latin America has greater possibilities.

New opportunities abound through privatization in education. Pressures to modernize and the need for the flexibility to do so, pressures for access from families whose students do not score well on state entrance examinations, and a desire for order and predictability in the educational process are some of the reasons for this development.

Healthy Competition

If nothing else, privatization is leading to some healthy competition. Even the most hidebound state institutions, after years of lumbering along in administrative complacency, are now trying to make their own operations more effective and attractive within their budgetary constraints.

They are now looking to establish exchanges with U.S. universities for both undergraduates and graduates, willing to admit students to appropriate classes, provide them with advising and mentors, and grade their final examinations.

During the past year, even the grand old *Universidad de Buenos Aires*, home of the greatest literature faculty in the country—if not in the hemisphere—where politicization, strikes, administrative chaos and huge class sizes made it impossible to consider for our students, has begun to look toward exchanges. In line with this, it is welcoming U.S. undergraduates, capable of handling the work, into selected classes.

While new private institutions offer exciting options, as always, there is a flip side to consider. And as we always tell our students, forewarned is forearmed.

For study abroad programmers, the principal concern is the quality of the experience for our students at any new institution with which we might affiliate in order to provide direct enrollment opportunities.

We need to inquire about the students attending these universities, the qualifications of the faculty, level of instruction, and mission of the institution. Is it merely a money maker for its sponsors?

Requests for 55 new universities in Argentina alone...

If the new universities do not offer a full range of academic fields, how do we fill in the gaps? And finally, lest we forget, our students are not native speakers. What about intensive Spanish language courses for foreigners or, at a minimum, a support course throughout the semester or year?

Opportunities in Argentina

Educational privatization in Argentina has resulted in such a plethora of opportunities for direct enrollment in university classes as to be mind boggling!

In addition to the existing private universities that many of us know about, such as *Belgrano*, *Salvador*, *Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina*, and more recently, *San Andres* and the *Universidad Torcuato di Tella*, the Ministry of Education currently has requests for the establishment of 55 more! The fact that each

petition must be accompanied by a million dollar bond in order to be considered does not seem to be a deterrent.

Obviously, there are differences in both academic focus and mission among these institutions. Some are begun with a genuine educational mission, others purely as a business.

Curricular Limitations

The new universities are not required to offer what would be called a complete university curriculum. I have in my hand a variety of pamphlets from universities that began as think tanks, institutes, or were formed by business groups, such as the Chamber of Commerce. All started out with limited offerings determined by either the market place or what was considered to be a national priority by the founders. These typically have been economics, business administration, communications, international relations, and even history. Some, such as the *Universidad Maimónides* (1990), offer a first degree in medicine, odontology, or business. With time, more departments are added on, and some fields are dropped.

For us, the difficulty has been that few of these secular private universities offer enough humanities for a well-rounded study abroad program. This has meant that those of us with programs based at secular private universities, as opposed to the two Catholic universities in Buenos Aires, have until recently been required to create special classes for our students in such fields as literature and history of art.

That situation has changed however, with the new exchanges with the *Universidad de Buenos Aires*. In fact, to see the glow on the faces of students enrolled in literature classes at the *Universidad de Buenos Aires* is enough to convert the

Study Abroad continued

most hardened to the benefits of placing students in the most challenging academic setting, and watching them stretch themselves.

In one case, the professor invited the group of U.S. students for coffee once a week to make sure they were able to keep up.

Historical Faculty Problems in Argentina

In Argentina, the majority of faculty work part-time at not just one, but as many as three different educational institutions, and run their own professional offices as well. Low wages have resulted in a floating pool of faculty who may have additional professional commitments as lawyers, architects, etc. to make ends meet.

The *dedicación exclusiva* (full time commitment) to one institution is nonexistent, and all but a few key individuals are hired by the hour.

What this means for study abroad programs is that faculty do not always make it to class, and there is a good amount of turnover.

The new *Universidad Torcuato di Tella* (1991) in Buenos Aires is taking a different approach. It requires that all its teaching staff have doctoral degrees. Moreover, the faculty must be on the premises full time, keeping office hours and engaged in research. This is the exception rather than the rule, however.

In support of this approach, the *Universidad Torcuato di Tella* is currently limiting its enrollment to 100 students per year, for a total of 400 in the undergraduate program, and its academic offering to four fields only.

New Faculty Problems in Chile

The difference between the situations in Argentina and Chile has been that in Chile, there is a tradition of professional, full-time academic commitment, and equivalent salary for university faculty.

University teaching is a full time professional career in Chile. To "moonlight" is not a Chilean concept.

Of the approximately 70 universi-

ties in Chile, 25 are state-owned and 45 are private. National examinations driven by government policies limit enrollment by field in the public universities and have led to the proliferation of private universities.

The emergence of these private universities and the shortage of qualified faculty to teach in them has meant that professors from the older state and church-affiliated institutions in Chile are, in fact, moonlighting. This can be interpreted as a state subsidy—in the form of trained and qualified faculty members—by the traditional universities to the newer ones, who are unable to support full time professors. Criticism of this practice has received much coverage in the media.

Fewer Campus Facilities

Facilities are another concern. New universities will be short on space, at least in the initial years, when the pattern seems to be to convert a turn-of-the-century mansion into classroom and office space.

Adequate library facilities are a concern because textbooks are generally unavailable and book prices astronomical.

It goes without saying that the U.S.-style campus is not a model for these institutions. Residence halls are nonexistent. Non-academic activities are strictly off-campus, private arrangements. Sports, for example, are played on the outskirts of town in private clubs, to which students belong through their families.

This is why it is important for study abroad programs to have both a good housing coordinator and a network of former host national students, who have studied at the sending university, to assist U.S. students in finding the outlets that are normally provided on every U.S. campus. Our program, built around exchanges, is developing an alumni association of students affiliated with the program to help with social activities and internships.

Struggling with the Language

Finding good faculty in the field of Spanish as a Second Language also is not easy. I have no good answer for this, and

year that for the present, no one else does either. In my experience, language classes provided by our host institutions in Argentina and Chile are staffed by retooled English teachers, linguistics professors, and old-time grammarians in the native language.

Some of our newer methods utilized in classrooms at home do not translate well abroad. Surrounded by the foreign language, U.S. students beg for structure and grammar explanations, not the strict communicative approach.

We are trying a variety of options, including bringing Chilean faculty to Illinois to work with us so that we can do a better job of pre-departure preparation articulated with the overseas experience. This is very expensive. In Buenos Aires, we are using a dynamite language institute for a month of intensive pre-program language preparation that the students have rated as "outstanding."

Finally, one must consider the student profile at the private universities. The typical undergraduate is a middle or upper middle class student. Our students complain about the "snobbery" of the students at these institutions. Although most either speak English or are studying it with a view to studying outside of their home country, they show little interest in our students or in much outside of their comfortable existence.

The private *Católicas* and the state universities, on the other hand, provide a more egalitarian mix of students, but can be too large, too demanding and too confusing for some students who are looking for less of a challenge. The small entrepreneurial private universities do more handholding.

Regarding fields of study, no single university—either private or public—offers the U.S. student the curricular or the social diversity to make me want to zero in on one institution for all our program needs. Nevertheless, the four major private institutions in Buenos Aires, plus the *Universidad de Buenos Aires*, now offer us a wide variety of options. As we tell our students, "what you can do in Buenos Aires is only limited by the time it takes to commute!" □