

# Expanding Opportunities Through Consortia

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**D**emand for program opportunities overseas is mushrooming on your campus, but there are not enough students to start a program of your own. Although a pocket of faculty support exists for study abroad in a particular part of the world or academic field, these same faculty members are not enthusiastic about any currently available programs. What they really want is to closely monitor the quality of the academic experience of their students abroad. In other words, there is a need for a program in which your institution has a sense of real "ownership" without all of the headaches and responsibilities of running it alone. Enter the consortia program--an arrangement with a limited number of other universities or colleges which allows for direct involvement in the management of the program but spreads the administrative responsibilities among members of the group. What should an institution bear in mind when considering entering into a consortia arrangement? How do these limited consortia work in actual practice? To learn more about this I spoke to Dr. Kathleen Sideli, Associate Director for Academic Affairs of the Office of Overseas Study at Indiana University, an institution with considerable expertise in the limited consortium model. You will find her insights most useful.

## *In seeking ideal partner(s) for a consortium, what should we look for?*

First, you want to look for institutions that are similar to your own in size, structure, funding mechanisms and commitment to the academic field or fields that will be the focus of the program. Underlying all of the more obvious similarities are the most important ones of all: the need to work cooperatively and comfortably with institutions of comparable academic standards and administrative structure.

## *What is the optimum number of consortium partners?*

Anywhere between two to six--large enough to fill the program with the necessary number of students to be

cost effective, and small enough to be able to work together. This includes finding times to meet once or twice yearly as a group to discuss academic, financial and logistical issues. There are advantages in time and cost in geographic proximity, although some of the disadvantages in long-distance communication are now obviated by the use of E-mail.

## *What kind of on-campus administrative structures work best?*

A central study abroad administrative unit at member institutions works better than a lone academic unit. This becomes crucial when looking at the costs involved, from telephone and stamps to the salary of the resident director. Costs may need to be spread over a group of programs, particularly in the start-up

phase. Commitment by the relevant academic units on campus is essential, however. Otherwise, there are problems in recruiting students for the program.

## *What about different academic approaches and standards among consortium members?*

Unfortunately, too many aspects of this most important issue are not discussed up front in the process of selecting partners. Policies on eligibility requirements for students, including prerequisites, grading, credit, pass/fail, minimum course enrollments, and how many "program" versus "mainstream" university classes are required are just a few of the factors that can vary considerably from one institution to another. Otherwise, the unsuspecting resident director in charge of managing the program abroad can

become hopelessly entangled in the bureaucratic mire of varying academic policies.

I highly recommend that there be good communication among members and the "lead institution," the lead institution and the resident directors, and among members and their students about these issues. A good program manual common to all members can be produced to which each institution adds its own bits about specific campus requirements, etc.

## *How is the actual administration of a consortium program managed or shared among a group of institutions?*

For many consortia, a "lead institution" bears the major responsibility for both the domestic and foreign operations of the program. This role should be given to the institution most suited

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for the job, not necessarily to the school initiating the consortium concept or the one with the overseas contacts. Consortium management is very labor intensive. Despite the economies of scale principle, servicing consortia can take up a great deal of staff time. On the other hand, rotation of the administration among members has proven less successful. As in any study abroad operation, continuity is crucial for smooth management.

***How is administration and other financing handled in consortia management?***

Usually all members pay a fee to the lead institution for expenses related to administration. There may be an initiation fee for new members or when a consortium is initially founded to get the program off the ground. The role of "lead institution" is really quasi-volunteer in nature. A portion of the administrative costs, at least in terms of staff time, is understood to be absorbed by that institution as part of its overall mission. Student fees generally cover the overseas portion of the program, such as instructors, classroom and office rent, excursions, materials, etc.

***Is it necessary for all member institutions to finance their program in the same way?***

No. Some offices and programs may be supported

from a central administrative source, others almost completely by program fees. While institutional support is crucial, the relationship between charges, costs and student numbers tends to be different on each campus. If one operates on the basis of covering all costs through charges to students, this can be a problem at a state institution with a majority of participants paying in-state tuition. Our programs see the optimal number of participants as being around 30, coming from no more than two to six institutions. If all costs must be covered by the equivalent of in-state student fees, the program will have to be much larger or the fees much higher to comfortably cover the cost of a full-time resident director from one of the sending institutions. This is why members of our consortia, where the resident director position rotates among institutions, look for departmental support for funding when it is their turn to staff this position.

***Speaking of resident directors, how do consortia usually handle on-site administration?***

Our consortia members agree to a full-time resident director sent on a rotating basis from among member institutions, and in most locations there is a small program administrative office that provides continuity. It is very important to agree on the qualifications, terms and financial arrangements related to the selec-

tion and tenure of a resident director abroad. Is it to be someone from one of the campuses on a rotating basis? Is it to be a foreign national? Is the position full-time, part-time? How is this position to be funded--from a pool of student fees or by the sending institution? Do all member institutions agree on the functions of the resident director? Even a resident director endowed with the greatest possible amount of common sense, cultural awareness, people skills and political savvy can be frustrated by lack of adequate preparation before departure about the very different ways in which each member institution handles student advising, course approval and registration on their home campuses.

Another related concern is how much power the resident director is given by the home institutions via the consortium. Can this individual remove an unsatisfactory faculty member and hire another? What about the authority to dismiss students?

***What kind of problems are most typical?***

In addition to academics and costs, one of the biggest bones of contention is the number of student places in the program. When this is directly related to the financial obligations of member institutions, it can be the source of resentment. For example, if a program has 30 spaces, and a university has ten wonderful applicants whom they have

worked hard to cultivate for this particular program, what happens if there isn't room for all of them? Furthermore, are costs shared equally among members no matter how many students they each send, or are costs figured on a per capita basis? What happens if you send no students one year?

In sum, there are many study abroad consortia merits, whether one chooses the close involvement offered by limited consortia or the opportunities of the larger nationally-based consortia, such as those administered by agencies like the Institute for European Studies and the Council on International Educational Exchange. The CIEE runs the largest consortium, or group of consortia. Because of its size, individual institutions do not exercise direct responsibility for any given program, but they are expected to send representatives to policy committee meetings, and the consortia members must agree to adopt each program. Also, the size of these larger consortia makes it possible to offer a much greater variety of courses for all participants. □



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