

Study Abroad in Latin America



by **Dr. Joan Solaun**

There seem to be two common misconceptions about studying in Latin America. The first is that the typical garden-variety Spanish major on a small budget looking for a program in Spain can be easily rerouted to a program in Mexico, Peru or Costa Rica. Equating Latin America with Europe can be a serious mistake! Students headed for Latin America should have a particularly high level of maturity, motivation, and sensitivity and as much advance knowledge about their study site as possible. A sense of humor and an ability to "roll with the punches" is especially important. The second common misconception is that the 21 individual countries that comprise the area between the Rio Grande to Tierra del Fuego are basically all the same. Study abroad programmers must be aware of the geographical, linguistic, political, historical, cultural and socioeconomic differences from one country to another.

Q: What is the history of study abroad in Latin America?

A: Although the GLCA (Great Lakes Colleges

Association) program in Colombia and the Kansas program in Costa Rica began over 30 years ago, before 1975 most of the students who went to Latin America were goal-oriented graduate students, and summer language students in a variety of programs in Mexico. The only really large numbers of young Americans who spent more than a few months in Latin America were the Peace Corps volunteers.

Q: Where are most of the study abroad programs located in Latin America?

A: For the past ten years, most group programs have located in Mexico, Costa Rica, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and of course, Brazil. These are the countries where political, economic and cultural interests forged close academic ties with U.S. universities. Geographical distance also played a part. Recently, security concerns have put Columbia and Peru on the back burner. The good news is that Argentina and Chile, the countries with the most European flavor and influence (and thus, in many ways, those with the least stressful environment for U.S. students), are being enthusiastically approached by U.S. institutions.

Q: We hear of Latin America as part of the Third World. How does this relate to study abroad concerns in a positive sense?

A: It is important that young Americans be exposed to the needs of developing nations. Their role as responsible citizens of the future must include a search for solutions to many of the concerns which they will come to understand only through personal experience outside of the classroom. Programs with internships that place students into the "real world" are very rewarding for personal growth and a real must for insights into the problems of development. Students can feel that they are making a difference. Latin America is a wonderful adventure, available at a cost that can be less than half that of its European equivalent (high air fares to distant sites such as Buenos Aires, Rio and Santiago can absorb some of the savings). Our freewheeling students can learn a lot from traditional societies, in particular the importance of the family and the value of good friendships. They will learn to worry less about efficiency and have a good, wholesome time without spending lots of money.

Q: What are the more negative aspects of study abroad in Latin America that must be considered in starting programs there?

A: Advisors must consider the impact upon the average student of the stresses of everyday life in struggling economies. It is important for all concerned that the

final result of this experience be positive and, initially, it is easy to become depressed by the hassles. In most parts of Latin America, including the major cities, it is impossible to avoid contact with problems related to underdevelopment: poverty, lack of hygiene, public services that do not function for hours or days, streets in disrepair, pollution, inefficient bureaucracies, endless lines, constant strikes so that nothing seems to get accomplished, and in Brazil and Argentina, an inflation rate of one thousand percent a year. To that we must add security problems and street crime. Students in Rio, for example, are adept at avoiding bus routes where buses are boarded by holdup men demanding cash and jewelry from all passengers. The need for pre-departure orientation, as well as good in-country support services for the students you send, cannot be overemphasized. The alternative is to run a program only for older, more experienced travelers ready for a new challenge. It is also important to be in touch with the Cultural Affairs Officer of the U.S. Embassy, who will be your ally in emergencies.

Advisors should know that women invariably mention the restrictions of life in traditional societies,

the sexist attitudes and, because of the closely knit family structure, the fact that female students of the same age seem so much younger.

Q: How should a study abroad advisor deal with these issues?

A: Although we want to encourage students to know Latin America, the selection process should weed out those who, after three days of tropical heat and no water, will run screaming to the nearest long distance telephone to call home in tears. Students need to be fully informed about what they are getting into to prevent them from taking their frustrations out on their hosts. Latin Americans are sensitive about their country's relationship to the United States and, rightly or wrongly, blame U.S. policies for many of their economic woes.

Critical, negative reactions to local problems only serve to reinforce the image of the "ugly American." Ideally, all undergrads planning to study in Latin America should have, in addition to advanced foreign language competency, a semester-long cultural orientation to prepare them for the experience *unless* they are planning to go on a short program that is very tightly structured.

Q: What institutions do U.S. universities find work the best as a basis for their programs?

A: For a variety of reasons, the private, often Catholic,

universities have proved to be the most reliable, flexible and receptive to U.S. students. The state, or national universities, are modeled on the old French educational system of "careers" or professions. This makes it hard to select courses "cafeteria style" as we do in the U.S. Furthermore, these institutions are subject to strikes which can close them down for months on end. However, the University of São Paulo and the University of Costa Rica are examples of two national universities that have worked well for CIEE and the University of Kansas, respectively.

The University of the Andes, in Bogotá, Colombia is an example of a private institution with a liberal arts focus. A favorite with many American schools, it has been very useful for both group programs and individual students. Other such institutions are the Universidad de Belgrano in Buenos Aires and the Catholic universities in Quito, Lima, Santiago and Santo Domingo (UCMM). The Iberoamericana in Mexico City is another such institution. New private institutions are springing up under pressures from families concerned about educational quality in times of fiscal crises.

In starting a program, institutions should think about reciprocity. An exchange agreement that accepts the host institution's students, faculty exchanges and other joint ventures builds trust and confidence in each other as partners.

Q: What kind of academic quality can we expect in Latin American universities?

A: Even in the private universities, few faculty members are fulltime. In Argentina it is not uncommon for a professor to practice his regular career in law, engineering or architecture during the day and teach at night--or teach in three different universities to survive financially. Our students complain that instruction is spotty and that faculty are often absent.

Q: How can we guarantee that our students will receive a quality education under these circumstances?

A: The home university (through its resident director) must keep up on suitable and available courses, as well as reliable faculty. Successful programs usually find it necessary to supplement regular university classes with special courses arranged for the group; at a minimum they provide an "umbrella" course or seminar about the country to help students put their experience in proper perspective.

Q: What about accommodations for students in Latin America?

A: In traditional societies such as Latin America most students live with their families until they are married or, if away from home, with other relatives. It is not easy to find apartments with students and there are no residence halls. One com-

plaint is that private universities will house American students with high income families. Students feel that they are not meeting "the real Latin Americans," but Latin administrators question the U.S. student's ability to live without unlimited creature comforts, and security is always a concern. Universities in some sites have been quite unprepared for the new wave of interest in study in their countries; in Argentina they are just learning how to place students with families as paying guests.

Q: What is the future for study abroad in Latin America?

A: Interest is definitely on the upsurge! Look for new programs in Chile and Uruguay, and more opportunities in Brazil and Ecuador. Costa Rica is becoming saturated with programs but is still an excellent site. The Dominican Republic is an ideal setting for internships but currently plagued with many of the problems of an economy in crisis.

If you are interested in learning more about study in Latin America, you may wish to attend the APLAC (Academic Programs in Latin America and the Caribbean) conference February 20-24. For information, contact: Mick Vandenburg, APLAC Conference Chair, Kalamazoo College, Kalamazoo, MI 49007.