

## *The Use of Partner Support Agencies*

by Susan A. Bird



Until recently, most schools that wanted to offer their students Study Abroad experiences developed their own programs. There are several reasons for this. One important one is that many schools wanted (and still want) to control absolutely the quality of their students' educational experience overseas, and they felt that the only sure way to do this was to run their own programs.

Increasingly, too, professors want to direct and teach in programs overseas. Their interest in an overseas experience comes at a time, however, when most higher education institutions are seeing a budgetary crunch.

Although most administrators believe (or claim to believe) in the value of an overseas experience, very few are willing to allocate funding to programs that can supply it. Those that do often want the programs to run on a self-funding basis. (Overseas programs are not the only ones expected to pay their own costs: college sports programs, continuing education, extension programs, English as a Second Language, conferences and institutes, and summer sessions are increasingly expected not only to pay their own way, but also to generate revenues for the institution.)

Programs at public institutions are probably more at risk in this climate than those at private institutions. The mission of public institutions is to educate the citizens of the region, whether state, country or city, using funds that are primarily supplied by the taxpayers of the region. These taxpayers want their funds spent on "meat and potatoes," not on what they perceive as the "frills," and unfortunately, too many taxpayers view the international experience as a frill.

Even the most enthusiastic faculty member may have difficulty in recruiting enough students for an overseas program to meet the minimum that the college administration must set as a realistic number for a program to run.

One solution to the problem of small enrollments has been to form a consortium, whose members agree to act together to create, sponsor, recruit for, run, and award credit for a particular program. In this way, each campus may need to contribute only a few students to produce a

viable program. Working in a consortium, however, requires the utmost flexibility and cooperation. Some schools still want to sponsor their own programs.

In this climate, the rise of the "Partner" or "Assisting" agency has been seen as a natural solution to a number of problems. These private, sometimes non-profit agencies can provide valuable services to colleges. Their staff members have extensive knowledge of various areas of the world and can work with a professor who may never have traveled outside the U.S. to customize a semester or short-term program abroad which will give her or his students the maximum cultural and educational experience.

Twenty years ago, there were approximately ten functioning partner agencies with a national presence in inter-

national education. Today there are close to 100. These agencies are often highly specialized: post-baccalaureate internships in Australia only; language programs in Italy and France; direct placement in British universities. Others continue to develop programs custom-tailored

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to the needs of their clients, whether this involves a semester in Nepal or a two-week culinary tour of France.

A partner agency can supply valuable expertise and support in the development of new programs at a college; it can provide materials and tips that make recruitment of students easier for novice instructors; it can invite senior administrators to travel to the proposed program site through "inspection trips" which are heavily subsidized by the airlines and overseas suppliers, thus giving a school an extremely low-cost way to view a program site overseas and make a decision before committing much of the school's resources. In the case where a particular program simply cannot generate enough students to make the overseas program a "go," the partner agency may be able to put two similar colleges in contact and assist them in combining their enrollments.

Because these agencies have continual experience in making overseas arrangements, including scheduling international flights, arranging home stays or space in student residences, organizing field trips, supplying local support personnel, and locating classroom space, they provide

a way for small, inexperienced, or overworked offices of international education to turn over the problems of support services and concentrate on the academic integrity of the program.

I recently spoke with an administrator of an office of international education at a school which wanted my office to take over the management of their program in East Africa. When I asked what had been done previously, since the program was in its fourth year, the administrator responded, "Oh, the professors and students fly to Africa and then after they arrive, the two faculty members immediately make all the arrangements for the semester." It turned out that she was seeking our help because her faculty was about to stage a mutiny, refusing to operate in this haphazard way any longer, a decision which I heartily applauded.

Because partner agencies deal with large numbers of students each year, they can provide support services with lower costs than a school could negotiate for itself. The resulting package price to the school can approximate the cost that the school would obtain itself, even when a small processing charge is added by the agency.

For a director of international education, the assistance provided by such agencies also means not having to deal with the sponsoring faculty member on every single detail, a benefit whose value cannot be overlooked.

Another cause of concern to colleges and universities is the fact that American citizens are more litigious than they were a generation ago. Risk Assessment Officers at schools are increasingly nervous about their potential exposure if students studying abroad under the auspices of the school come to any harm. The days of Professor X informally gathering up a group of 10 or 20 adoring students and "doing" the capitals of Europe in the summer or participating in an excavation site in the Middle East are drawing to a close, primarily because of the potential fall-out to the institution if anything goes wrong. Working with a partner agency allows the college or university to divest itself of a significant portion of the risk associated with sending students abroad because partner agencies carry heavy insurance.

Assessing the credentials of the partner agencies may be difficult. There is no professional organization to which these agencies generally belong, and no organization which has oversight of them. Some belong to NAFSA: Association of International Educators, but many do not. Many do exhibit at the national NAFSA conference, so the exhibit area is a good place to start. And they will find you! Most partner agencies have a marketing division, which is charged with the recruitment of new schools. The staff will phone or send literature on their services. Membership in professional organizations (NAFSA, the American Association of Community Colleges, College Consortium for International Development, for example) is a good sign that the agency views itself as a professional entity and not merely a business.

The reputation of the agency is very important. A school

wants to be assured that the people who assist with its overseas programs are international educators and have a history of working in an ethical manner. One should always ask for references and then call them.

What else should a school look for if it is considering relying on an agency to assist in developing overseas programs? Certainly, the agency needs to carry heavy insurance, both in the area of liability and as a performance guarantee. The first will protect the school in case of a lawsuit which might result from any problem of the program overseas and the second protects the school and students in the unlikely event that a program is canceled. A three million dollar policy is not unreasonable these days. Additional insurance, in the form of a health and accident policy which will cover students while they are abroad, and the option to pick up trip cancellation and obtain insurance at a reasonable cost should be a feature as well.

Some provision for having students' funds placed in an escrow or agency account is vital to assure that the money paid by the students can be used only for the program contracted by the school. The age, experience and reputation of the agency are significant. Any agency should be willing to provide potential clients with a list of references who have traveled with the agency very recently.

A contract should be signed between the agency and the school, specifying the terms of their cooperation. It is appropriate for a potential client to make specific inquiries concerning the corporate structure of the agency and the compensation of the directors or owners. A not-for-profit agency whose directors receive minimal compensation for their service is likely to offer programs at a lower cost than an agency whose corporate officers earn six-figure salaries. A college should request pricing of their program by several agencies to assure that the school and the students obtain the lowest cost for the same services. When the costs come in at about the same figure, the school needs to take into account these additional factors: how long has the partner agency been in business? What is its experience in the particular country where this trip is planned? What kind of support services will be offered as the program is developed?

If all these steps are taken, the relationship between partner agencies and colleges can be one which enhances the school's ability to offer a number of high-quality and diverse programs to its students and faculty with a minimum of work on the part of the school. □

*Susan Bird is Executive Director of the Consortium for International Education in Irvine, California. For further information on partner agencies, call 1-800-999-4992.*