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INTERNATIONAL INTERNSHIPS: PREPARING FOR THE CHALLENGE

ABSTRACT

Given the current climate of terrorism directed not only at Americans but at citizens of any country in the world by religious extremists, drug gangs, and even pirates, a concern for the safety of students interning abroad is a major consideration for most universities. By preparing the student for the challenge, the student's safety, while not guaranteed, can be enhanced, and the student will be able to handle most situations involving emergencies of any type. This article deals with a twenty-three-year-old program with a good track record of internships abroad.

Since 1984, St. Mary's University, a Marianist institution, has had a program that requires an internship abroad, with either a United States or international establishment, in a country that speaks the language being studied. The program is the Multinational Organization Studies (MOS) program in French, Portuguese, or Spanish. Initially German was one of the offerings, but it was later eliminated because of a lack of students. Since its inception, close to 200 students have majored in the program and have participated its internships.

Students have interned in Mexico, Canada, France, Belgium, Spain, Germany, Switzerland, Belize, the Ivory Coast, Puerto Rico, Honduras, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Chile, and Brazil. The internships have been served in a myriad of assignments ranging from the Supreme Court of Costa Rica to the Ministries of Agriculture of Chile and Honduras, the French Red Cross, the International Red Cross in Switzerland, the Ministries of Economics in Costa Rica, Germany, and Honduras, UNICEF-Spain headquarters, and the United States Embassy in Belize. Others have been in law offices in Mexico, Spain, Belgium, Costa Rica, and in entities such as banks in Chile and Honduras, hotels in France, Mexico, Germany, Puerto Rico, and Spain. They have also been served in several industries, such as wine exporters in Chile, a bread factory in Mexico, a transport company in France, a major German petrochemical company in Mexico and the Ivory Coast and several others in minor industries throughout the countries already mentioned.

The MOS Degree was conceived specifically to provide an alternative to careers in teaching for language majors. It consists of a thirty (30) semester-

hour major with some important differences. Twelve hours are specifically dedicated to the internship as follows: An internship preparation seminar (three hours) is required during the second semester of the junior year, and the internship (six hours) occurs during the summer between the junior and senior years. The final semester of the senior year, a post internship seminar (three hours) is required in conjunction with the junior class. The seniors must also write a senior thesis on an aspect of the country in which they performed their internships.

Given the current climate of international terrorism, especially directed at Americans abroad, there is great concern for the safety of students traveling and living alone on internships abroad. However, in the twenty-three years of the program's existence, there has not been a single casualty nor have there been any injuries resulting from accidents. To be sure, there have been cases of illness, as in the case of a student who came down with scarlet fever in Switzerland and had to be hospitalized for a week. Another student had to have an emergency gall bladder removal in Costa Rica. Aside from that, however, students have fared generally well owing to an intensive preparation and selection process.

Students participating in the program usually enter with an advanced language capability but usually need an immersion process to sharpen their language skills and to focus on the cultural aspects of living and working abroad. The internship preparation seminar is conducted over a spring semester. Students are required to conduct a study of the country in which they will be having their internship. The seminar is much more than a "don't drink the water" orientation. Students use several Internet sources, such as the Library of Congress Area Study site (www.loc.gov), to write and present a series of twelve essays in the language being studied on the following topics: political and economic geography, demographics, political structure of the government, culture and folklore, an abbreviated history, important persons in the nation's history, national symbols, transportation and communication systems including media systems, religious practices, and international contacts and organizations with an emphasis on country-US relations. The writing and presentation of the essays ensure continued language preparation by encouraging students to learn specialized vocabulary in several areas such as geography, economics, and politics.

Students are also required to present an update on what is happening in the country each week from the country's viewpoint. Online newspapers and periodicals such as *El Mercurio* in Santiago, Chile (www.emol.com) and

Excelsior de México (www.OCExcelsior.com) are readily accessible and are used for this requirement.

SELECTING THE INTERNSHIP COUNTRY AND SITE

The internship itself is related to the student's minor and is arranged to give experience in that field and an application of the language being studied in a real-life situation. Selection of the internship country and firm starts early in the fall semester with an initial interview with the student. The Director of the MOS Program continually monitors the international situation and decides if a country is not safe for the student. The student is told about the selection process and what is entailed as to location, country, and expenses. The student selects the country and participates in selecting the internship site. The approval of parents is required, as is a United States Passport.

Practically every minor in the university can be used in this major, although most opt for international business, communication-arts, or international relations. However, we even had an MOS German major with a minor in art who did her internship in Munich with an art gallery and was very surprised when she found herself working at an exhibition of some of the first artists from behind the Iron Curtain to show works in the West after the collapse of Communism. Another, an MOS Spanish major and sociology minor, worked with a battered women's clinic in Puerto Rico.

In the early years much of the selection of the country depended on personal friendships or assistance from personal contacts in various countries. The assistance of the Marianists in several of the countries helped with arranging the internships and with finding lodging and food with trustworthy hosts. This was instrumental in ensuring the successful placement of the students. An example is the MOS French student we placed in the Ivory Coast. The student, an African-American, wanted to explore his African roots and saw the program as a good way to do this. We contacted the Marianists in Abidjan and told them of our student. They arranged for him to intern with Henkel A.G, a German firm doing business there. They also found a family from one of their parishes to house and guide him during the internship. He had a marvelous experience, which later became a strong asset for his admittance to graduate studies at Georgetown University and subsequent employment with the United States State Department.

After the initial internships, we relied on foreign newspaper advertisements, yellow pages in telephone books, and on the previous sponsors to help expand the network. The advent of the Internet has simplified this process and

has increased the quality of internships. Now the Internet is used extensively to locate a prospective internship sponsor and to provide the student with suitable living arrangements. In Spain, for instance, we routinely ask the sponsor to help us find suitable lodging with families, in reputable *pensiones* (boarding houses), or Colegios Mayores (Student Residences).

Once the student's internship site and housing are in place, the parents are encouraged to establish contact with the host family to personalize the process. Firm friendships grow out of these relationships, and students often return on their own to visit their "family" after the internship. Should the situation not work out, for whatever reason, there has to be an alternative plan. The internship sponsor usually comes to the rescue to find alternative lodging for the student, as occurred with a student in Mexico, who could not get used to the host couple's children. She asked to be given alternative housing, and we managed to find a *pension* where she could finish out her internship. This rarely occurs, however.

Internship sponsors, as mentioned before, have ranged from large international concerns to small "mom and pop" industries. We have also placed students with international government concerns such as the Ministry of Economics in Costa Rica, Germany, and Honduras. Since the bulk of students are minoring in business and administration, it is the most sought-after position. We have the student involved from the very beginning. We start with a letter to the CEO, or owner, of the establishment we are targeting and let them send it to their Human Resources person, who is usually the respondent to our inquiry. The contact is made by phone, in the language spoken in the country, by one of our teachers of the language. The CEO/owner is told about the program and asked if, in principle, s/he would be amenable to an intern for a short period for an "observation practicum." If the response is favorable, it is followed by a letter detailing the student's professional/academic profile and the dates of the internship. Most of the internships are unpaid, although students are given access to the same benefits as regular workers of the firm. In some cases, they are given a nominal living allowance, but placing them on the payroll would involve conflicts with labor laws, immigration, and other problems. Since its inception, we have always been pleasantly surprised at the good will and willingness to help a student exhibited by the internship sponsors.

EMERGENCY PLANS

University regulations require the students to have an insurance plan that provides for emergency evacuation for medical reasons. The reality that all

aspects of life are uncertain, including the possibility of an accident, are drilled into the students. Students are required, as part of their preparation, to look at the requirements for emergency evacuation such as reading local embassy or consulate warnings and advice, routes to the airport or to a seaport, and to have a cash emergency fund on their person or readily available. Above all, they are taught to rely on their house parents or their internship hosts for guidance. They are instructed also to avoid large gatherings, such as political demonstrations or marches.

Given that they are by themselves in the country, they are also instructed to avoid any conduct that may draw attention to themselves. They also receive instruction on ways to avoid problems with house-parents, and are told not to drink or party excessively, use the telephone too much or without permission, or have visitors in their bedrooms.

Students are also instructed to contact the MOS program director first in any emergency. Early experiences occurred where they would contact their parents first, who called the MOS director, who then had to call the student to find out what was happening. This chain of events only delayed the reaction time and created a lot of anxiety among the parents and the student, who could not understand why it was taking so long to get a solution to their problem.

POST INTERNSHIP DE-BRIEFING AND SEMINAR

The students are graded for the internship on three papers, written in the language studied, on a cultural topic, an economic topic, and a political topic on their experiences in-country. No library research is allowed so that the students must leave their living quarters and explore the country. They report on first-hand observations. Some interesting papers have been received, such as an interview with the leader of the Communist Party of Mexico and an interview with leaders of the Gay Rights Movement in Munich. Students are also required to bring back a letter of recommendation from the internship host stating the required duties and level of performance attained, along with recommendations for employment or graduate school. The letter is often used later as an attachment to employment or graduate school applications. The student, however, receives a Pass / No-Pass grade for the internship.

In the spring of their senior year, students participate in a seminar with those going on their internship that summer and share experiences with them. They also write an undergraduate thesis on a problem in the country in which they interned.

SUMMARY

Although there have never been any severe problems with the students participating in the program, the fact remains that the potential is always there and the university can minimize the possibility only to an extent. However, by giving the students an intensive and formal preparation prior to sending them to international destinations, many for the first time in their lives (or even taking their first plane ride) one can ensure that if an incident happens, the students will react as instructed and a tragedy will be prevented.

The involvement of the MOS program coordinator with all aspects of the program is also crucial to the success of each intern's experience. No detail or concern is too insignificant to consider, since one never knows what might happen if left unattended. Immense trust is placed in both the coordinator and the students themselves. With good planning and execution, they will have an experience that will yield not only good memories, but a valuable work experience in an international environment.