INTRODUCTION

The impact of both the marketplace and AACSB accreditation has resulted in a substantial interest in “internationalizing” the business curriculum and encouraging student experiences in schools of business across North America and throughout the world (Heischmidt 1997; Gordon, Heischmidt, and Greenwood 2000). An overseas study experience is viewed by many in education as the best approach for business students to learn about the international dimensions of commerce (Blasco 2009).

The first step in the internationalizing process is to offer a variety of programs that will meet the needs of various student circumstances. Many universities have developed opportunities for students to study for a semester or school year at another school outside of their home country (Gordon and Heischmidt 1998). These opportunities are usually by way of unilateral agreements or consortium arrangements, which allow the students to participate while paying only home university tuition fees. As the tuition cost is the same, the financial barrier is reduced. Complementing such exchange programs with a variety of scholarships may further entice participation. An alternate opportunity is that of a shorter term program for students traveling internationally for one to four weeks to visit businesses and commercial establishments (Gordon et al. 2000). These programs, in particular, appeal to non-traditional students or those students who are working their way through school. With such programs, the time required is reduced for those heavily obligated with work and family obligations.

However, there is often a disconnect between availability and participation. Once these programs are in place and on offer, how can a university maximize participation? After many years of various promotional efforts to encourage participation at the home university of the authors, more aggressive techniques described here have developed to move to a quasi-mandate for participation.

DISCUSSION

The “Carrot”

Students should be encouraged to participate in an international experience. The benefits should be communicated and every possible excuse that students might use in order not to participate should be addressed.

Elimination of Perceived Barriers

What stops a student from participating in a study abroad program? Numerous barriers, both real and perceived, prevent participation. Among these barriers are:
Communicating the benefits of a study abroad program is imperative in order to increase participation. Students should be assured that participation will not delay their graduation, and might, in the case of short programs over university breaks, actually allow them to graduate earlier. Other benefits that may be emphasized include:

♦ The value of such an experience being included on the student’s resume should increase job prospects.
♦ The program will increase the students’ cultural awareness.
♦ It will make the student a more informed, global citizen.
♦ It may ignite a passion for lifelong travel.
♦ Students will learn more than in a class-room setting.
♦ The program is an investment in the student’s future.
♦ The program will be a life-changing experience.

The list of potential benefits should be both short-term and long-term and also include those of a non-academic nature. This is one area where select past participants may be able to best communicate the fun aspects of such a program. A careful balance between recreation and learning must be presented.

In order to appeal to more students, universities should develop a variety of programs to eliminate destination barriers. Semester or year-long programs need to be offered at a variety of locations to best meet the needs of a diverse student body. Some students want certain location to spur their interest – offering various locations makes for a much easier “sell” than trying to talk a student into a location in which they have little interest. Further, locations in which classes are taught in English reduce the language barrier. This does not mean that programs are geographically restricted to English-speaking countries. All of the programs in which the authors’ university participates offer full semesters of business classes taught in English. Consequently, it is possible for a student to spend a semester in, say, France, without any advance knowledge of French.

Experience has shown that semester long programs are more appropriate for certain students, especially those on track for graduation, those who have the financial resources and the freedom/flexibility to be away from their regular home situation (Gordon and Heischmidt 1997). Bi-lateral exchange agreements or membership of an exchange consortium are the lowest cost ways of creating these options for your students.

However, the semester long program is not best suited for all students (Ladika 2009). Many students find it difficult to be away from their home for such a long period of time. This may be due to limited financial resources on the part of students (or parents), the need by students to work to obtain the financial resources for their education, responsibilities for others in the family such as caring for children or parents, or just a case of being uneasy with venturing out far from home because of limited life experiences. Many students, first college generation students as well as nontraditional students, fall within the situations mentioned above (Shallenberger 2009). These students still need to be exposed to international business experiences, but may need to have different options from the traditional semester long exchange program (Gordon and Heischmidt 2000).

To eliminate the time barrier, alternative approaches to international education need to be considered. In contrast to semester long programs of international study, a study program that consists of a shorter period of time may be appropriate for many university students. An appropriately designed short term program may allow many students, including a growing number of nontraditional students, a chance to experience international business in person while balancing the needs of family and jobs at home. A short term experience of one to a few weeks may allow students to take advantage of overseas experiences which requires only a limited absence from family and work responsibilities.

Financial barriers also need to be reduced. There may be a variety of approaches. One is to provide travel scholarships to select students. In the case of the authors’ college, scholarship funds were made available to each professional student organization (for example, Alpha Kappa Psi, Finance Club, Society for Human Resource Management, etc.) This served the dual purpose of eliminating a financial barrier, but also rewarded participation.
in student organizations. Alternately, scholarships might be awarded on a need basis, or by competition or some other means.

Promote

If the adage of “location, location, location” is true of retailing, then “promote, promote, promote” is the mantra of international education. Posters and flyers need to be prominently and frequently posted all over campus. Informational sessions need to be frequently held. As much as possible, in-class announcements need to be made. Students need frequent reminders of the options that are available to them. Using past participating students to address campus groups, such as fraternities and sororities may also increase the level of awareness. Perhaps even develop contests where such groups compete to see which can have the most members study abroad.

Direct e-mail campaigns can also be utilized. The more targeted the message the better. Obtain mailing lists of various majors and send a specifically targeted e-mail to each group.

However, one of the most effective components of a successful recruiting program is enthusiastic support of faculty members. Those with international experience should be encouraged to share their background with students.

And Now the Stick . . .

Regrettably, all the above actions will only motivate a small number of students to participate in an international experience. Participation rates of 10–15 percent of graduating seniors is considered above average. So the question becomes – how do we reach the other 80 percent – 85 percent of students?

Here the department created a dual approach. Faculty members need to be willing to promote the international study in classes (Heischmidt, Gordon, and Dobson 2000). Faculty members have to get students excited about international travel. The faculty member will help close the loop for the student. If the faculty member is excited about the program, so will be the students. Recruitment of students is a reflection of the support of the institution and advocacy by interested faculty members. It is a year long process.

While enthusiastic faculty can often be the best salespeople, a survey of the personal travel profiles of any given business faculty is likely to reveal a relatively large number of professors with minimal personal overseas experience and perhaps no professional international experience. So the first step becomes the internationalization of the faculty.

Unfortunately, like students, many faculty members do not have much interest in overseas travels, let alone professional activities. To encourage greater interest, consider including international activities in the College/Department Tenure and Promotion guidelines. In the authors’ department guidelines, in all three areas of faculty member evaluation, explicit mention was made of international activities. Teaching a class, guest lecturing overseas or traveling with students overseas were included in the teaching component. Presenting a paper at an overseas conference or other professional growth activities overseas were specified in that section of the promotion/tenure guidelines. Even service was “internationalized” – advising an international student club, mentoring an overseas competition team, etc., were all specifically rewarded service activities with international aspects.

Next comes the focus on the student “stick.” A new degree requirement was passed with would require all students to have either an internship or an international academic experience as a pre-condition to graduation. Few students would qualify for an exception to this policy. The expectation was that around 75 percent – 80 percent of students would opt for the international experience, while 20 percent – 25 percent would complete an internship. Some may do both. The value of requiring a “real world” experience of all students was viewed as essential for them to effectively compete in the job market upon graduation.

Here the creation of overseas opportunities for faculty and students comes together. The added number of students seeking an international experience has been, in part, accommodated by offering intensive classes of two to three weeks offered by our faculty at an overseas institution during the summer. Classes may even be team taught with host university faculty members. This would provide the opportunity for both students and faculty members to have an overseas academic experience. Creation of such short classes usually fits within the university’s summer calendar while providing the faculty member with a summer overload class. Cost can be kept to a minimum by using partner university facilities. It might also be possible to arrange a reciprocal experience for the overseas university, where they bring a class of their students to your campus in the summer. This in turn might provide further internationalization as these students are integrated into U.S. campus life.
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Such short classes overseas were quite inexpensive, costing students as little as $1500 more than a domestic on-campus class. With two or more years to plan for such an activity, few students could claim financial hardship – putting aside around $60 a month during their junior and senior year is hardly overly onerous.

It is expected that within two years almost 100 percent of graduates of the department will be able to show a real-world experience on their resume while faculty members are provided with multiple opportunities to enhance their international experiences as well.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of the authors providing international study opportunities for students during the last two decades have provided innovative approaches as to how to increase student (and faculty member) participation in the internationalization of the business school educational experience. If a faculty member wants to really impact a student’s life, encouraging an international study opportunity may be the most beneficial and rewarding experience they will ever facilitate.

This paper attempted to look at the barriers that prevent student participation, and suggested ways to increase involvement. Various “carrots” were suggested as ways of increasing “voluntary” participation, as well as “sticks” to force students to think about ways to increase their job marketability by international program participation. At the same time, processes were suggested which may also enhance faculty member internationalization.

ENDNOTE

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REFERENCES


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