

Our view

Parents, Pills, & Pandering

*fourth in a series;
generating thoughts and
discussion in the
study abroad community*

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This is the fourth in a series of **“food for thought”** pieces from CIEE. The themes vary but all deal with **study abroad for U.S. undergraduates**. We present our ideas not as the only viable ones but rather **to stimulate discourse** in furtherance of the study abroad enterprise. Previous topics include “How Are We Doing?”, which addresses student goals and awareness, “Standards” in study abroad, and “A CIEE Eye for the Study Abroad Guy...or Girl” which discusses dress, attitudes, and behavior of students which affects their cultural engagement abroad. We **welcome your comments and requests** for additional copies at any time to **editor@ciee.org**.

Anybody who deals with college-age students and their families, which comes with the study abroad territory, knows that things have changed a great deal over the last 10-15 years. A good deal of this change has been for the good—greater interest and participation in programs, more diverse and well-structured programs to meet the needs of a more diverse participant group, greater institutional and faculty support for study abroad, and many more achievements and advancements that we can all note. None of us have any desire to go back to the good old days, whenever those were. Having noted these pluses, however, we have to note that there have been changes in the landscape which are more complex, problematic, and less conducive to quality program conduct and execution that we simply can't ignore. This essay deals with some of these issues.

Parents

There has been a sea change between the parents of study abroad students 25 years ago and today. Like all changes, this one has been happening gradually as we move from the “greatest generation” to the baby boomer generation and beyond. We all know from experience that parents come in all types and with varying attitudes but there do appear to be some consistent themes coming through. Parents today are far more involved in the lives and choices of their college-age students than at any time in the past. These days we see parents at study abroad fairs on campuses; they show up with students for orientation; and they are involved in everything from grade disputes with faculty to housing issues. Since we can't presume and don't really believe that they love their children more than parents of a generation ago, our presumption is that they are driven to make sure that everything is “just so” for their children.

Since many of us are parents and of the same generation, we can laugh a bit at ourselves when parent behavior causes inconvenience. After all, isn't it reasonable that parents of 21-year-olds expect us to arrange for birthday cakes while abroad? We know that things do change and that everything from college selection to admission is far more difficult and complicated in this generation than the last. But when the pattern starts to impede the ability to con-



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duct programs and do our work properly, then we need to think again about these issues. The real problem as we see it is when the parent crosses the line from being interested, helpful, and supportive to becoming the personal representative of their child on some particular matter be it grades, housing, or whatever. We respect that parents have a rightful role and are concerned about their children. We like ours too. But, part of the experience of college and study abroad is for students to learn how to do for themselves. Parent direct involvement, except in unique circumstances which we'll discuss later in this essay, simply isn't productive.

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We are not going to change the world and we are not going to change the expectations of a generation of Type A parents. But, we can do some things to ameliorate the situation. First and foremost, we need to keep them informed. While we would like parents to communicate with us via their student, we often make the mistake of communicating to parents via the same conduit. Perhaps this is a mistake. We believe that direct communication to parents of our expectations for their student and how they can contribute to the learning experience is a necessity. And, we believe that in this generation of better-traveled, better-educated, and more-involved parents, we have the potential for reaching a group of allies on these matters. Parents listen and pay attention these days and given strong arguments and good materials, they will for the most part be responsive. Showing up at orientation, tak-

ing their kids out of classes to travel, and similar behaviors are, on their part, presumed appropriate behavior. If we know anything, we should know that unless we're clear about our expectations it will be impossible to try and alter their behavior. Parents can also be helpful in wardrobe preparation, encouraging host country integration, and in a wide variety of other ways.

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But, let's not kid ourselves when the proverbial you know what hits the proverbial you know where, parents of this generation are not like the parents of prior generations. Years ago, there was a presumption of "we're on this team together" so let's deal with this problem. Today, it's more, "you screwed up with my kid and you damn well better fix the problem now" before I sue. We're sorry it's come to this, and we've even caught ourselves sounding like this, but reality is that the innocence of our relationship with parents is gone. In this environment it is imperative that parents see and approve the contracts that students sign so they understand the commitments they're making when they go abroad. Putting aside the legal issues of who signs what, the key is that parents are part of the process and need to be informed more than at any time in the past. When things go wrong total transparency and honesty is essential. Moreover, careful documentation and follow up is absolutely essential in order to later avoid "he said, she said." In every problem we've seen that gets worse, it's because of the failure to confront the issue head on, right away, and with clear and consistent leadership and follow through. There is no other way in these times.

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Many of us are parents and believe that parents should and can be allies and supporters in productive and meaningful study abroad experiences. But, we're not our grandparents and our policies, procedures, and actions simply haven't always modified themselves enough in the face of the societal changes we're undergoing. A millennial review for dealing with a millennial generation certainly seems in order.

Pills

Last we heard, about six million children were on some form of psychotropic drug, maybe more. As they grow up and go to college, this doesn't necessarily stop. Depending on which source you check, as many as one in three college students today are taking some form of medication that is designed to impact them psychologically. The card catalog of common ones like Zoloft and Paxil to many, many others is overwhelming. In turn, this population studies abroad. For the most part, students taking medication for these purposes do fine abroad. However, the psychological pressures of adjustment to a new culture, a new way of going to school, new friends or lack thereof in a different environment from their home institution, and a language in which they often struggle can be overwhelming. And, the supply of medications as well as routine usage can be more easily disrupted overseas than at home.

All of us have medical information and release forms that attempt to deal with these issues. We all try to identify potential problems to assure that a program will be successful for each student. But, we all have experienced difficult situations from attempted suicide to psychotic breaks, from eating disorders to aggressive behaviors and tantrums, from cutting to confusion, and the myriad of other behaviors associated with psychological problems. On home campuses, with parents often not far away and staff and health services experienced in these matters, there is an infrastructure to turn to for assistance. But, for a Resident Director working

primarily alone in conjunction with a local institution that doesn't have this infrastructure, the problems are much more vexing.

In short, they are and can be, rather than a pest, a part of our delivery team in assuring that their child has a great semester or year abroad.

While a few parents are in denial about the emotional adjustment and mental stability of their offspring, for the most part, our experience is that parents of these children are very much in touch and very sensitive to the issues. Our communication on these matters to parents should be clear, direct, and unequivocal. We should remind parents of the specialized pressures of study abroad, the common problems of drug outages and skipping medication that often occur, and make sure they are sensitive to these issues. And, we should make sure they have a contact point at the program site so if they have the slightest inkling that there is a problem with their son and daughter, they let us know. In short, they are and can be, rather than a pest, a part of our delivery team in assuring that their child has a great semester or year abroad. If we want them to join up we should invite them to participate and draw the parameters of that involvement.

No matter what we do and how we do it, problems are going to occur. Whether it's a mild depression or some other psychological or psycho-social issue, it's inevitable. There are two responsibilities that must be met head on when this happens. First, parents and home institutions must be instantly informed. "Don't tell my parents" is not a good reason not to tell parents. We would rather go to court any day for divulging a psychotic break of a 20-year old who claims privacy rights than to inform a parent that

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their child, who requested we say nothing, has hurt themselves or worse. While we respect privacy rights, we do not respect that mental disorder is a matter of privacy, but rather an emergency and must be dealt with as such. Second, even in the most remote places there are resources – male and female psychologists and counselors, physicians and others – experienced in dealing with these matters. They should not be discovered after problems occur, but must be part of the safety net of every program, just like an evacuation plan.

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Last but not least, we know that these types of problems are the most difficult ones Resident Directors (RDs) confront. A Ph.D. in Art History or Modern Languages does not necessarily have the background for dealing with a student who loses 25 pounds in one month and has all the outward symptoms of a serious eating disorder. Even the most sensitive RDs can be stymied by how to respond to a student who is abusive, self-destructive, or demonstrating abnormal behaviors. Our view is that RDs need a support structure that they can turn to 24/7 for assistance in these matters. This structure should include the emergency intervention help described above along with advice and counseling on how to intervene in the particular situation from experienced U.S. based personnel. This U.S. based support team is the one that can also interface with the sending school, the parents, and others who might be involved in the problem.

Pandering

There is a lot of discussion in study abroad about how to bring teaching and course structure, including syllabi, up to U.S. standards. We would be the last ones to deny that there are places in the world

where instruction is sub-standard and there certainly is a need everywhere for careful teacher and course selection in order to attain reasonable academic quality. But if we really want people to study abroad, don't we defeat the purpose of the experience by having the same teachers, the same students, the same courses, and the same processes that they would have at home? Isn't one of the purposes of the experience for it to be different? What's going on here? In our view, there are two edges to this sword.

On the one hand, we have faculty and academic departments who are examining study abroad against a filter of U.S. collegiate norms and their own self image that says "Nobody does it better." In this environment, it's not surprising that study abroad professionals find themselves in a bind. While they want the student to have a unique experience abroad, one that is reflective of the host country's academic system and culture, they need to get approval for programs and courses to make this happen. The balance is often a delicate one. We believe that the best programs strike this balance. But, we're concerned that in many cases the experience abroad is neutered in order to satisfy this educational imperative. Each institution and departments within institutions have to address these issues.

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Let's not put the total blame on the academy. Students too want the familiarity of home while abroad, from classes to housing to diet and more. You can't have your cake and expect to eat *tapas* too! We should set expectations with students that study abroad is different and it's supposed to be different. We should remind them that different isn't bad;

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different isn't easier or with less value; but different is different and part of the challenge is to extract the benefits of that difference. This is not an apology for those places and programs that truly need to be improved to meet U.S. standards. But, as we all know, British universities which are hardly less skilled than U.S. schools don't have syllabi, reading lists, and "explicit feedback criteria" that match the U.S. format. This is but one international example. The large lecture that characterizes much teaching around the world puts more responsibility for learning on the student. We shouldn't try to remove that responsibility but rather assist the students in fulfilling their obligations in that system. Done right, this is part of the learning experience.

Study abroad remains a unique and singular experience for a college student. Participation has grown and programs around the world have proliferated. At the same time, the student population and their parents' involvement in their education has changed. It is likely that the numbers can grow significantly over the coming decades but only if the experience meets the expectation. We believe that for this to happen, in today's world, its going to take a more concerted effort on the part of program operators to bring parents into the loop, not just in special circumstances where psychological issues need to be addressed, but in the overall process from pre-departure to return. They can contribute or detract, and to some extent, which road they travel is up to us. At a minimum we can build the signs that point them in the right direction.

At the same time, we should recognize that the student population we're dealing with is different from the one that participated during the formative years of study abroad. They are more diverse. They are more complex. And, they are more likely to be using medication to manage psychological challenges that in an earlier day were handled in other ways. Whether this is right or wrong, good or bad, is nei-

ther here nor there. It's reality and we need to staff, prepare, train, and learn to cope with the difficult situations that often arise today. While these situations are not the rule but the exception, they now occur with enough frequency that they can't be considered an aberration but are rather part of the mainstream of program operations.

Finally, we believe that part of the value of study abroad is the cognitive dissonance created when students see and experience systems of education different from their own. Comparative cultural learning requires comparison experiences. By trying to spoon-feed students a U.S. system in a foreign culture we feed a process that at best is counterproductive to the purposes of the enterprise. We fully recognize the educational imperatives of sending schools and equally recognize that some host countries and institutions are not up to the best of U.S. standards. But, we also know that the pressure for Americanization goes way beyond the need to ameliorate these problem situations and locations. By careful preparation of both students and teachers, we believe that a balance between different and effective can be struck.



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August 2005

OV3.5K