Evaluation Executive Summary

Evaluation of the CIEE Study Center in Uppsala, Sweden

Evaluation Oct. 12-17, 2014

CIEE Center evaluations are conducted roughly every 10 years, and after approximately five years for a new program. Evaluation Teams are made up of one or two members of the Academic Consortium Board joined by faculty from Consortium members with expertise in the areas of the program. The Team reviews all aspects of the program and focuses in particular on any areas of concern reflected in the annual monitoring reports and/or staff reports.

I. Evaluation Team members:

Kathleen Fairfax, Assistant Vice President for International Affairs and Outreach, South Dakota State University
Susan Fox, Professor of Mathematics and Computer Science, Macalester College

II. Colleagues with whom the Evaluation Team met: CIEE Resident Director Felicitas Rabinger, Hanna Lundin, Student Assistant for CIEE program, Uppsala University staff (Anna Sjostrom (head, Division of Contract Education), Kay Stevenson (Head of International Relations), Erika Dabhilkar (Head, International Office), Stephanie Noroozy (International Coordinator for incoming American exchange students), program students.

III. Last evaluation Conducted on: This is the first time the Study Center has been evaluated.

IV. Program Background/History:

Founded in 2009, the CIEE Uppsala Arts and Science Program is among the newer CIEE programs in Europe. During the last semesters, the Uppsala program welcomed between fifteen and twenty students each semester. Those students take direct enrollment courses at Uppsala University (UU); some may also take the two-credit CIEE course Seminar on Living and Learning, which is taught by the Resident Director (the course is optional). The courses that students take vary every semester and range from disciplines such as history, politics, anthropology or literature to biology, math, physics and IT. Some courses are regular courses attended primarily by Swedish students, while other courses, taught in English, are intended primarily for the many exchange students which Uppsala hosts every semester, from all over the world. The program is open to students of all majors, provided they fulfill the minimum GPA requirement of 3.0. Prior knowledge of the language is not required, although a number of participants are heritage speakers or learners of Swedish. The program attracts a relatively high number of science majors, since it offers a wide selection of science classes in English.

All CIEE students are accommodated in “student corridors” in the Flogsta housing area. Usually, twelve students share a corridor, both international and Swedish, which allows for intercultural interactions. No more than two CIEE students share a corridor. Students tend to be very satisfied with this kind of housing, since it helps them to get out of the “American bubble” and to make friends outside of the CIEE group.
Given its relatively small size, the program only has one full-time staff member, the Resident Director. The Resident Director, Felicitas Rabiger, advises in academic matters, plans group cultural activities, informs the students about practical matters, teaches the Seminar on Living and Learning, and is in charge of all logistical aspects of the program. In addition, during the semester there is a student helper who works approximately 10 hours a week.

V. Focus of Evaluation: The Uppsala program has benefitted from strong student evaluations and very competent on-site leadership, combined with a willing and collegial partner in Uppsala University. As a result, there were not any major issues which the review team was asked to explore. The primary concern, expressed in different ways by the students and the staff, revolves around the nature of the Uppsala University courses, specifically whether they are academically rigorous.

VI. Key Discussions/Findings: Regarding the question of academic rigor, the Resident Director and other staff indicated that American students sometimes have difficulty adjusting to an academic system which focuses more on self-study and independent learning, mistaking fewer class assignments as a lack of “rigor.” Students, on the other hand, at times describe courses which truly seemed to lack rigor, by U.S. or Swedish standards. The apparent “difference in opinion” results from the rather chaotic and confusing way in which courses at Uppsala University are offered, both in terms of schedule and in terms of content.

In terms of schedule, courses are offered in time blocks, often of only 4-5 weeks, meaning students only take 1-2 courses at a time and focus intensively on that topic for that time, and then move on to the next course. If a student has a time block that only has one course, it may seem like a light load, for that time only. They may have three courses the following block, and have no free time and an extremely demanding academic schedule. This unevenness of work load may give some students the impression that courses lack rigor.

In addition, Swedish students, like most European students, follow a curriculum that is focused on their major area of study, with few “electives” and no general education requirements. As a result, Swedish students in their 2nd or 3rd year of university study are further along in their major field than are their U.S. counterparts, which means most CIEE students take intro level courses because they simply do not have adequate preparation for the content of those courses. Additionally, in order to accommodate the large number of incoming exchange students which Uppsala receives from all over the world, the university offers a significant number of courses designed specifically for this population.

Therefore, we have no doubt that Uppsala University is a top university, not only in Europe, but probably in the world. Swedish students seeking a degree at Uppsala undoubtedly receive a high-quality education which does in fact emphasize self-study and independent learning more than is typical at most U.S. universities. However, that said, the rigor and quality do not necessarily extend to all courses which are offered specifically for incoming exchange students. The fact that these courses are taught in English means that the majority of CIEE students take all or most of their courses from
this list of courses for exchange students. Based on student feedback, and on our own observation of a very small sampling of these courses for foreigners, there is some unevenness to the quality of those courses. Since the CIEE program in Uppsala tends to attract academically motivated students with strong backgrounds, it is understandable that student evaluations have included comments about a lack of academic rigor on the program.

We believe that a good part of the “rigor” problem can be alleviated by careful noting of which courses tend to routinely receive complaints from students regarding rigor, as certainly not all courses aimed at foreign students are weak (probably only a minority are). More detailed academic advising can take place, steering students towards courses known to be of high quality and away from those with frequent complaints. However, this is not necessarily an easy fix. Course registration for Uppsala must take place before the students arrive on-site (due to the university’s requirements), meaning they must select courses without the benefit of face-to-face advising from the Resident Director, like happens on most direct enrollment CIEE programs.

The RD discussed developing on online academic orientation, to complement the online pre-departure orientation which currently exists. This may be a good way to begin laying the ground work for course selection, with attention to building a schedule that makes sense both in terms of time blocks and in terms of course selection.

All other aspects of the program seemed to be functioning well. The amount of cultural immersion on the program is impressive, as students eagerly and easily integrate into student life at Uppsala. The student “nations” have a history going back centuries, and they provide CIEE students with opportunities to meet Swedish students, engage in fun activities with long traditions (formal dinners, for example), and even work for wages. Housing is certainly adequate, with fairly large single rooms, private bathrooms, and shared kitchens. Excursions have consistently been evaluated very highly by students. And the on-site staff is extremely competent and well-liked by the students.

VII. Priority Recommendations:

RECOMMENDATION 1: CIEE should seek ways for Uppsala’s Resident Director (RD) to be directly involved in advising about course selection during the pre-departure phase, because course selection must be completed well before departure and Portland staff cannot have sufficient knowledge to do this adequately.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The Resident Director should monitor student evaluations carefully to assess whether some courses should not be recommended in the future.

VIII. CIEE Action Plan

In response to the Academic Consortium Board (ACB) Evaluation of the CIEE Study Center in Uppsala Sweden: Arts and Sciences Program

January 2015
Overview
CIEE staff are pleased to provide this Action Plan in response to the Academic Consortium Board (ACB) report on the Uppsala Arts and Science program.

The Action Plan outlines the key recommendations from the evaluation and the specific steps CIEE plans to follow to address the recommendation. While the Action Plan is authored by CIEE, staff solicited input from the ACB team leader from the evaluation, Kathleen Fairfax, Assistant Vice President of International Affairs and Outreach, South Dakota State University and, where appropriate, from the other member of the evaluation team, Professor Susan Fox, Professor for Computer Science at Macalester College. The Action Plan should be read in light of the ACB Evaluation and with reference to the detailed description of the program available from CIEE.


Actions

ACB Recommendation
CIEE should seek ways for Uppsala’s Resident Director (RD) to be directly involved in advising about course selection during the pre-departure phase, because course selection must be completed well before departure and Portland staff cannot have sufficient knowledge to do this adequately.

Action
In response to this recommendation, the Resident Director has drafted a course catalog for the program designed to make it inform students and Portland staff which courses are available for CIEE students. For the coming semesters, the RD will hold individual course selection meetings via Skype with students a few weeks before the application deadline. The RD will also forge a closer cooperation with the CIEE Study Abroad Advisor and the RD regarding the course catalog and the course selection process at Uppsala University, including regular update meetings. In addition, the RD will offer an Academic On-line Pre-Departure Orientation (OPDO) a few weeks before the application deadline, in order to explain the course selection process in detail and to give the students the possibility to ask any questions they might have about Uppsala University.

ACB Recommendation
The Resident Director should monitor student evaluations carefully to assess whether some courses should not be recommended in the future.

Action
To better recommend – or steer students away from – courses, the RD will have students complete evaluations for each individual Uppsala University course they take and will record the feedback in a database. Additionally, the RD will discuss with students their courses at the four individual semester meetings and ask specifically about their satisfaction with their individual courses, to include in the database of recommended courses. In addition, it is important to prepare students for the differences between the U.S. educational system and
the Swedish system and why this contributes to U.S. student perception that courses lack rigour. Swedish social science/humanities courses emphasize more self-directed study, and in many courses, it is only the final exam that counts towards the final grade, so many students feel that they are not challenged during the course due to the lack of assignments. Therefore, even though many of the students feel that the courses lack rigour, their grades are not necessarily reflecting that. It is thus important to coach students and help them navigate the different academic system in the best way possible.

Submitted by:

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Date: January 28, 2015