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Teaching Abroad: Ensuring a Good Opportunity is Really GREAT!

October 30, 2018 | By Garry Mcdaniel
Teaching Effectiveness

With increased globalization, more colleges and universities are establishing faculty exchanges, study abroad programs, collaborative research efforts, and technical assistance programs with counterparts overseas. The result is enhanced faculty development, increased learning for students, added revenue generation, and prestige for the partnering institutions. For faculty, the opportunity to teach abroad can be a fulfilling and career-enhancing experience. However, if faculty are inadequately prepared and supported, valuable time and resources are wasted, student learning is impacted, and the image of the institution and faculty member may suffer. This post examines how faculty and their home institutions can ensure that teaching abroad is not just “okay” but a great experience for all involved.

Why Global Expansion?

Benefits for colleges and universities that establish international partnerships include added revenue generation, attaining international recognition and image enhancement through international teaching, research and outreach (Sutton & Obst, 2011). Faculty are often representatives of a partnering college or university with responsibility for teaching classes, conducting research, leading study abroad programs or providing technical assistance. A faculty member’s ability to communicate effectively, adapt their teaching style, and respond appropriately to cultural differences can be an important element of student learning and the success of a research effort while also enhancing perceptions of their home institution. Given the investment in time, money, and prestige, it would seem prudent that institutions of higher education take reasonable steps to ensure that faculty are well prepared and supported in their assignments.

Where We Are Going: Preparing to Teach Overseas

Baseball legend Yogi Berra famously said, “If you don’t know where you are going, you might end up someplace else.” What is true in sports is also true when it comes to planning overseas academic efforts: Knowing where an institution is going makes a big difference to the success of an overseas initiative. The good news is that between corporate experience in sending employees abroad to do business and that of colleges and universities over the past decades, a lot has been learned to ensure proper planning of global academic initiatives and assignments. Keller (2001) found that an effective process for preparing academics for work in another country included reliable selection, pre-departure training, on-site socialization, and effective repatriation. In preparing for this article, this author conducted interviews with representatives of educational institutions in Oman, Poland, Slovakia, and Grenada as well as with several faculty from Franklin University

in Columbus, Ohio who have taught in one or more countries. Responses from these two sources support the four elements identified by Keller (p. 31) and is integrated into the information that follows.

Reliable Selection

First impressions are important. Identifying the right person to complete an overseas assignment is an important first step for any institution. Selecting the right faculty member includes ensuring that the individual understands the assignment and the way it supports the school's mission. Other considerations include selecting a faculty member with the right academic and institutional knowledge, interpersonal skills, tolerance for ambiguity and stress, and adaptability (Keller, 2001; Yaton & Hall, 2008).

In some cases, it may also be important that the faculty speak and read in the language of the overseas partner. Finally, the faculty member should understand how the assignment can serve as a positive personal and professional development opportunity.

Pre-Departure Training

Today it is easy to hop on a plane or take a cruise and visit other countries. However, visiting another country as a tourist and doing so to fulfill a need for one's university or college is another thing. Companies, universities, and colleges have found that it pays great dividends to ensure that faculty have the opportunity to learn about the country or regions they will visit. Understanding a country's culture, religious traditions, history, and geography helps ensure that faculty respond appropriately in different situations (Yaton & Hall, 2008). At Franklin University, faculty are given the opportunity to talk with other faculty who have already visited a country and they may also access videos, books and articles that are kept on file at the university library. Some faculty also seek out international students and speak to the country coordinator through Skype or by telephone to learn more about the culture, traditions, and student learning styles. In addition, the university typically has staff that help faculty understand travel advisories, emergency procedures in case of accident or illness, how and with whom to communicate overseas, and other key points.

On-Site Socialization

Once a faculty member arrives in a country, it is helpful to provide them with an orientation. In our experience, this may include an overview of pertinent local laws, where and how to exchange money, transportation plans, dignitaries the faculty will meet, teaching/research itinerary, time for sightseeing, and whom to call to resolve problems or if there are questions. In addition, almost all Franklin University faculty stressed their desire to become familiar with their teaching location. "As soon as possible, I like to visit the building and classroom where I will be teaching so I know what to expect. I want to see the room firsthand, test the technology, and meet students if possible," said a professor of operations management. Country coordinators also found that helping faculty socialize to the local environment was helpful. The coordinator from Oman observed that the socialization process appeared to help faculty relax, anticipate any problems, and engage more quickly with students.

Effective Repatriation

There are two good reasons for ensuring that returning faculty are repatriated effectively upon return from an overseas assignment. First, the institution has made a significant investment in time, energy, and resources in supporting the overseas assignment. Debriefing the faculty member can help administration understand what went well and where improvements are needed. If the assignment was long-term, the institution should also ensure the faculty member knows they have a job waiting for them upon their return and that their new experience, skill, and knowledge is appreciated and will be utilized (Yaton & Hall, 2008). For example, faculty can make recommendations for improving current or future course offerings, research efforts, or expansion plans. Second, leading a group of students on a study abroad program, conducting research, or teaching a course overseas is an exciting learning experience. Consequently, institutions should provide a forum where returning faculty share their experience and learning with others.

Conclusion

In a very real sense, faculty are the "face" of the institution and putting the appropriate amount of time and effort into preparing faculty for overseas assignments is important not only for the institution but also for the faculty member as well. By ensuring that both the institution and faculty do their due diligence to ensure that faculty are well prepared for overseas assignments, the potential for success is greatly enhanced.

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