

Spreading Our Wings: ECU MLS Program in the Global Arena

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ABSTRACT

The importance of cultural competence in library practice has been noted by Montague (2013) and Overall (2009). Means of achieving such competence can be partially met by course content; however, research indicates that study abroad experiences can provide a richer experience. In addition, being able to complete an internship is another venue in which to broaden LIS education globally. Establishing connections and investigating possibilities are means to achieve global education goals. With these goals in mind, the MLS program at East Carolina University offered both study abroad and internship opportunities during the past three years.

TOPICS

Education of information professionals; Sociocultural perspectives

CULTURAL COMPETENCE

The importance of cultural competence in library practice has been noted by Montague (2013) and Overall (2009). Incorporating diversity within the LIS curriculum, including a diversity course, provides a foundation to the professional world outside both local and national boundaries. However, experiencing a different culture in person adds a dimension that courses cannot provide. Visiting or working in various types of libraries outside the U.S. also broadens students' perspectives of the profession on a global level.

STUDY ABROAD AND INTERNSHIPS

Both Farmer (2018) and Chancellor (2018) have recognized that study abroad experiences in LIS education can provide these perspectives. In 2017, the ECU MLS program partnered with the counselor education program in the College of Education to explore educational partnerships in Lisbon, Portugal. Portugal was selected as the first interdisciplinary study because it shares some similarities with important contextual parameters with eastern North Carolina, including industry transitions, an economy influenced by tourism and the coast and families dealing with poverty. Providing graduate students in Counseling, Educational

Leadership and Library Science with the opportunity to explore these issues in a European setting encouraged greater understanding of the depth of complexity presented by the concerns and the potential for shared learning, innovation and collaborative strategies to address these issues on the local and global stage. The study abroad programs are coordinated through the ECU Global Affairs Office and require submission of a proposal for approval.

As the first leap into the study abroad arena, the Lisbon initiative set the stage for a study abroad in Paris. The second initiative involved library science students only, from both ECU and other LIS programs. It built upon French connections that had been established by faculty both in person and via email. Paris' economic, political, and cultural prominence, breadth, and influence make it a significant player in global affairs. Additionally, the relationship between France and the United States dates to the beginnings of our country. This study abroad involved general comparisons of French and American libraries and visits to public, academic, and school libraries in Paris.

The third study abroad, again focusing specifically on libraries, took place in June 2019 in Florence, Italy. This third endeavor included collaboration with Dr. Anna Maria Tamaro, a LIS professor from the University of Parma. Florence is one city that provides diverse educational and cultural opportunities in a relatively compact area, with an emphasis on special collections. All three of these study abroad efforts have been rewarding and are serving as a foundation for the future, with a possible permanent rotation of the three locations.

During the same period of establishing the study abroad courses, a partnership with the American Library in Paris (ALP) evolved and formed the establishment of an internship at the ALP for ECU MLS students in the public library concentration. The ECU MLS program requires an internship of each student. In May to June 2018, two students interned; in March and June of 2019, two other students completed their internships. The program faculty are committed to continuing our alliance with the ALP.

BUILDING CONNECTIONS

Another area of a global connection that has been established is a visiting LIS professor from Nigeria. The impetus for this collaboration occurred during an IASL conference in 2016. During that time, faculty met Dr. Fadekemi Oyewusi and conversations led to discussions of this possibility. Dr. Oyewusi joined the faculty for both the 2018-19 and 2019-20 academic years.

Establishing connections is vitally important to moving forward and maintaining global initiatives. This was first evidenced by faculty visits to the American Library in Paris, with networking continued at IASL, and collaboration with Dr. Tamaro at ALISE. Looking toward additional opportunities, faculty have met twice with the library director at the American University in Paris regarding an internship for a student in the academic concentration for 2020. One connection can lead to another.

As Moore (2016) noted, a study abroad can broaden the student experience. This viewpoint can be expanded to internships as well. Through these global experiences and internships, students gain greater understanding of the depth of complexity presented by libraries worldwide, the wealth of knowledge contained therein, and an understanding of the ways people use and enjoy libraries.

As noted previously, faculty infuse diversity and global awareness when possible. Several students and alumni live in countries outside the United States as well, adding to this diversity. Faculty believe that providing this foundation and opportunities increases awareness of other professional avenues. For example, one alumna has accepted a three-year appointment as Director of Library Services at Shrewsbury International School – Riverside in Bangkok, Thailand. Another student applied to the same school for a one-year internship. One could argue that an awareness of the world beyond the U.S. has been enhanced by promoting global opportunities.

FUTURE

Moving forward, faculty realize that the program has undergone new initiatives in a relatively short period of time. At this point, plans are in process to survey both the participants of our study abroad courses and the internships. This survey will be conducted in July 2019. Gathering data will provide three years of feedback for the study abroad students and two years of data (four interns) for the interns at the American Library in Paris. The analysis of data will be completed in August 2019 and allow the program to build upon the global experiences in a systematic way.

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