

## **Designing and marketing a global business travel course**

Ann Langlois  
Palm Beach Atlantic University

Ed Langlois  
Palm Beach Atlantic University

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper's objectives are to present and identify successful strategies for planning, designing and implementing a global business travel trip with a pre- and post-academic class schedule. The courses' destination changes annually. The information gathered and presented is from four regional business trips.

The discussion will center on strategies in building a successful travel program at a small university, course content, business visit selection, recruiting, and selecting a flexible mix of students and alumni. Travel programs require additional resources in terms of commitment, funding, and assistance from various departments. The key to a successful Global Business Course with a travel trip component is commitment by the faculty team leader and enthusiasm.

Keywords: study-abroad, business, curriculum, design, planning

## Introduction

Many universities are offering study abroad programs which center on spending a full semester at an international university. This is a wonderful opportunity and requires the university to be actively involved in an alliance relationship outside the US. For many smaller universities, this is not a realistic scenario in terms of exchange students, economies of scale and possible accreditation issues. Allan E. Goodman, President and CEO of the Institute of International Education, noted that the experiences afforded through study abroad provide American students with the skills needed to live in today's world. Dr. Goodman in an article published in *Open Doors* (2008) states the following "International experience needs to be a component of every student's education, equipping them for 21st century careers and for global citizenship."

International knowledge and experience are essential for students as they prepare for the global business economy (Open Doors, 2006). International educators must continue reminding campus leaders about the value of gaining a global perspective (Fischer, 2009). Martha Johnson (2009) discusses the need for graduates to develop a competitive edge by expanding their knowledge of global cultures and multinational businesses through participation in study abroad programs.

Some universities have accelerated efforts to expose students to the global environment by requiring an international focus on the business curriculum. This stronger focus on integrating the international business component into the business courses is a direct result of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) requirements and accreditation standards (Marklein, 1999).

This paper's focus is on designing a quality international business course which incorporates a travel component during the 15 or 8 week semester and can be customized for smaller universities. Discussion and recommendations for assessing academic credits, course design, curriculum development, trip destination choice, promotion, and pricing from travel trip arranged by the Rinker School of Business will be discussed and analyzed. A well-designed program is an invaluable experience for both undergraduate and graduate students, as well as for the faculty.

The paper's second objective is to identify a simplified model that professors in smaller universities and colleges may use as a guideline to design a quality global business trip in their respective business schools. Private universities and colleges which are not ranked in the same manner as the state universities sometimes are at a disadvantage in offering global business trips. The primary reason is that without a fully devoted multicultural administrative organization at the university, the planning and trip implementation may become overwhelming for faculty.

## Literature Review

Researchers Gordon and Smith (1992) and Schuster (1993), discuss strategies to create and administer a short-term exposure trip. The pedagogical orientation is in the course's multiple destinations in a short time span. Both programs maximize the location and cultural opportunities. The program designed by Gordon and Smith takes into consideration that students have limited resources. One of the primary goals of the short-term educational trips, according to Gordon and Smith, is to instill confidence in a student's ability to internalize to a new environment. Gordon and Smith (1992) present a detailed itinerary of tour activities but little

identification or recommendations on the logistical preparation involved in planning and organizing the trip.

Cateora (1993) points out in his research the difference between the “factual” and the interpretive forms of knowledge. The factual cultural knowledge of a country requires a series of steps beyond the textbook readings. Understanding a culture requires students to participate in more hands on approach which goes beyond the country discussion and research. Global mindsets are developed by experiencing the culture first hand, by visiting and participating in the norms, rituals and communications in the country. This is established by extending country visits which highlight cultural and business visits.

Koernig (2007), provides specific recommendations and strategies towards managing student pre-trip anxiety, internalizing the student to the new culture to minimize cultural and/or language barriers, designing and selecting learning activities. Koernig’s research and discussions are based on feedback from previous global trips, as well as his experience, and may serve as a roadmap for the first time professor planning a global trip. Koernig’s second goal is to address the gap left by Gordon and Smith (1992) in responding to on-the-ground crisis and challenges a faculty leader encounters during the trip.

While studying international programs in Mexico, Tobenkin (2009) concluded that many university administrators in the United States are expanding their study-abroad options as the research reinforces an increased awareness that global experience plays an important role in higher education.

There is little disagreement that meaningful international travel experiences lead to a less ethnocentric mindset (Douglas and Jones-Rikkens, 2001; Saghafi 2001). However, there is little research focusing on the pedagogy as compared to the abundance of literature and research available on logistical program design. Kashlak, Jones and Cotner (1999) and Ornstein and Nelson (2001) address the issue of pedagogical design in the MBA courses. Low tolerance of other cultures is typically not associated with intellectual and business growth. Kedia, Harveston and Bhagat (2001) addressed the framework design for global curriculum development. Developing a global mindset through academic programs and global business trips will produce a higher quality global manager. Students who develop cross-cultural business skill are more favorably positioned for success in the business world.

Beyond simply going abroad, Uracca, Ledoux and Harris (2009) have sought to immerse the students on their field trip into an environment which would force them to step out of their comfort zones. In the process, the students learned that some of the most important components of preparation for the trip are intercultural communication training, language proficiency, and reflection. The authors used a multifaceted reflection program, with time set aside each day for reflective activities and journaling. This particular trip also revealed that the higher the language proficiency of the students, the more self-sufficient they are in interacting with the local people and the more they will participate in some of the decisions being made on the trip.

## **Destination**

*Open Doors (2008)* discuss the fact that American students are more frequently choosing non-traditional study abroad destinations. The number of U.S. students studying in China, Argentina, South Africa, Ecuador and India each increased by more than 20 percent over the

previous year. This increase is fueled in part by an increase in new program opportunities, partnerships between higher education institutions in the United States and abroad, and a range of fields and program durations to accommodate the needs of an increasingly diverse study abroad population.

Destinations for the university's global business trips were to the Czech Republic, China, Vienna, Austria, and, most recently, Egypt. Guidelines for destination selection are based on emerging market potential, safety, economic conditions and current political environment. Many students and their families are reluctant to travel to Asia, the Middle East or South America. However, security, language barriers, and political and legal structures are concerns which make university group travel appealing.

Students traveling with family and friends are not exposed to business visits. The corporate and governmental business visits offer unique opportunities for students and alumni to network and inquire about internships. Changing the destination choice annually further promotes student loyalty and increases the number of students participating in a second or third trip.

### **Faculty Selection Process and Qualities**

Global business trip destinations change yearly. The destination change requires faculty to prepare new materials annually. There are many excellent books describing a country's business and social environments. The country research books written by distinguished authors are excellent texts but they rarely are supported by ancillary instructor materials. New faculty members teaching a course with a global business trip component are faced with new preparation annually combined with administrative and logistical responsibility.

Faculty team leaders assume the responsibility for the group on a 24/7 basis during the business trip. Gordon and Smith (1992) recommend elements of selection and self-selection of faculty leaders to accompany and/or accept the primary leader role. The primary faculty leader and support team work well together if all members exhibit commitment, organizational ability and the required skills in relating to students.

Successful faculty exhibit high degrees of enthusiasm and interest in learning about new countries from a business and cultural perspective, (Fischer, 2009). The recommendation is for a faculty member teaching a global business course with the travel component to consider a two-year commitment to the course and travel.

### **Pricing and Contract Negotiations**

Trip locations are many times based on the best price and the state of the economy. Some best practices identified in the global business trip courses are: work with the reputable travel or education agency to establish a suitable cancellation policy based on course dates and airline rules. One must also understand the fine print in the contract. Ensure the travel agent has appropriate student information for billing. The agency's role is critical in mitigating university risk associated with contracts and country negotiations. Careful agency selection will ensure that payments are processed immediately and that both the cultural and business trip objectives are met. Faculty are best suited to serve as group leaders and liaisons. Their best role is not in serving as a tourist agency.

A trip's final price increases as you build in more dinners and lunches. It is recommended that breakfast be included in the hotel pricing. Breakfast ensures that students have a higher level of concentration throughout the morning.

In addition to meals, check to ensure all costs are quoted, including any security-related expenses (Middle East destinations may require additional security if the US deems this a necessity). On the most recent trip to Egypt, a Canadian tour operator was selected. The Canadian tour operator was proficient in Egyptian culture, business protocol and logistics. The only unfortunate issue was the fact that the Canadian agency was not familiar with the US government requirements when hosting US Citizens who tour Egypt. The US government, although on friendly terms with Egypt through aid and political agreements, requires that all large groups have an armed security guard traveling on the bus at all times during the trip. The result was a last minute fee prior to the trip departure, resulting in concerns over the agent's expertise.

Students prefer cultural visits/tours included in the package. This allows students and their families to better plan their travel budgets. Tours may be cultural, interactive, sightseeing visits and/or walking tours. It is best to schedule a business visit in the morning, followed by a cultural tour in the afternoon.

If you are including meals - which is a good idea while traveling for a full day - negotiate with the agent on three or four menu selections. Students become bored with the same food and, including lunches during the business day's events, sometimes you risk repeating the same menu items. In many cases, students are full from a hearty breakfast and don't need a break until after 2:00. Scheduled lunches sometimes take a long time and require good organization. By allowing students to select their own restaurant, many will select a fast food establishment. In many ways, this might work out well, due to fewer group logistics issues and delays.

Dinner arrangements usually don't work with a large group. The participants are tired after being up early and traveling. You may consider an opening dinner and a closing dinner for the entire group. Include pricing for tips, luggage handling, and tips for drivers and tour operators. Check on the policies for each country.

### **Currency Rate Fluctuations**

Currency fluctuations are an issue that will impact the cost of the trip adversely. If the country destination is subject to escalating currency valuations, this must be factored into the final trip price as a "reserve." Students can then be given the unused, reserve monies during the trip, which is a pleasant surprise. An example of currency escalation was a trip planned in 2007 to the Czech Republic and a subsequent trip to Vienna in summer 2008. The designated country's currency exchange is an important issue to negotiate. If this is not negotiable, then build a minimum of 5% into the preliminary budget to account for currency rate increases. Researching the country's exchange rates will assist you in determining the most realistic percentage increase to consider in the budget preparation. This is an important monetary item as the negotiation of exchange rates between the U.S. and the country of interest can be a source of hidden costs.

A word of caution: *Be very conservative in your estimates.* It is much easier to give students a rebate (extra meal, theater tickets, etc.) than to underestimate costs and have to go back to them for extra money prior to departure. A low trip price probably means you made a

mistake somewhere. Check, double-check, and check again. Have an experienced trip leader go over your budget to make sure you are not forgetting anything.

### **Promotion**

Once the trip destinations are finalized, develop the promotional flier. Assign students participating in the trip to this project. In addition to promotional flyers, consider having students design poster boards for display in your business classrooms. Include an itinerary and label it “Tentative.”

Another successful information tool is designing a website. Then, determine the best group responsible for website updates.

Previous student participants are excellent promoters for the upcoming business trip. Another suggestion is to visit the junior and senior business classes prior to the official promotion date.

### **Global Business Trip Course Design Model Table 1**

### **Assignment of Academic Credits**

The undergraduate business trip is a three-credit hour course. Students must be in their junior or senior year, and have completed the Principles of International Business pre-requisite course in order to qualify. Students must secure the travel monies in addition to the course tuition. Eligible students may be considered as candidates for a one-credit internship course. Determining academic credits for a short-term program varies. The Institute of International Education (2008) reports significant variations in institutions' calculation of credits. The variations potentially point to differing perceptions of short-term study abroad's academic rigor and the degree to which a need is felt to reward out-of-class learning experiences. Some colleges say, for instance, that if a student is in class 30 hours per week, they can earn two credits in that week abroad. Meanwhile, others say that, for every hour of class time, another two hours of outside-of-class work is expected, and so they essentially grant one credit for every 45 hours, 15 in the classroom and 30 outside it.

In accordance with a more formalized set of Study Abroad Guidelines, the course content was specified and learning outcomes must achieve the same expectations as regular on-campus courses. The academic assignments require a pre-travel, travel and post-travel assignment. The goal is to connect the academic with the experiential content. Each academic credit hour requires a minimum of 5 location days, excluding travel.

Most recently, Palm Beach Atlantic University's Study Abroad Committee (2008) formalized the course guidelines to ensure the travel component in a course is academically justified. For academic credits, the course must demonstrate academic rigor, learning outcomes, trip length, materials and a course schedule.

### **Course Design**

The course design centers on the global destinations' business, political, economic and cultural environment. The spring semester at Palm Beach Atlantic University is the designated semester for the regional business travel course. The course is offered to the undergraduate and MBA students under the course titles of "Regional Business Environments" (undergraduate) and "Global Business Environments" (MBA). The undergraduate course may be taken as an upper level business elective. The course is required for all students taking the international business degree concentration.

Porth (1997) suggests a three-phase academic approach to a global business curriculum, where the course content in the first half of the semester is designed to rapidly build students' awareness of the country's culture, business, political and economic climate. Students are required to research specific aspects of the country, complete readings and present findings prior

to the trip. All academic readings, business periodicals, videos, and examinations focus on the pre-trip learning outcomes.

### **Teaching Materials for Course Content**

Course destinations change annually. In many global business courses, there are few instructor notes available for instructors. New faculty team leaders teaching the global business trip courses are sometimes challenged by the lack of instructor resources and by the length of time required to design the course content. There are multiple resources available to assist the faculty leader; however, the resources are not centralized in one data bank. Recommendations are to start early in gathering reference articles through newspaper, Internet access and business journals.

### **Course Cancellations**

Security, riots, and terrorism are a reality that must be considered in planning any trip. You are not able to predict the political environment of the country (in particular that of emerging countries) a year in advance. Any uprising can result in instability and reconsideration of the destination. According to Nelson & Ornstein (2002), the likelihood of disruption for an institution is not great, but it appears that the number of events that had signaled legal, political and/or medical concerns has recently been growing. Institutions are sponsoring more travel abroad programs outside of the Western geographic boundaries, creating higher levels of uncertainty and complexity in managing global trips. Having a policy in place and designated faculty members, to include the Dean, will ensure that an objective decision is rendered if a trip must be cancelled.

The faculty team leader's role is to identify and build information networks in the countries that the students will be visiting. Examples of reliable networks in foreign destinations include the US Consulate and Embassy, the American Chamber of Commerce, and business organizations that are scheduled for trip visits. The important issue is the safety of the students and the faculty. If there is any doubt as to the safety of the destination in the initial stages of planning, consider alternate locations. Many times, according to experiences discussed by Nelson & Ornstein (2002), heightened uncertainty about safety represents a moral issue vis-a-vis liability. As a professor, you are responsible for the safety of the students and, although the potential for learning in another environment may exceed learning experiences in a traditional class setting, the potential risk will not outweigh the benefits. Models such as Kohlberg (1979) on moral development can be used to facilitate the decision making process.

If a trip is cancelled, the professor must have a second course of action. The direction for the contingency plan is based on the timing of the cancellation. If a course must be cancelled prior to the start of the semester, the institution must be ready to place the student in an alternate course. The second recommendation is to consider offering the course as a directed study for students who still have an interest in learning about the country. This directed study alternative may create additional hardships for the team leader.

The final decision to cancel an international business travel course from pre-registration to class trip requires effective and professional communications. In times of uncertainty, followers turn to leaders for support and guidance. It is important to call each student and explain the decision. The personal phone calls require time and, during a crisis, the luxury of time is

sometimes not considered an option. The costs and time commitment may appear unrealistic; however, the time spent speaking with the students will ensure they receive accurate information rather than information pulled from the school's website.

### **Pre-Trip Assignments**

The trip's pre-trip assignments are developed with the objective of internalizing the students to the country. This is accomplished through a variety of learning formats. Successful projects involve both individual and team assignments.

A useful and practical research assignment is portraying the business trip's cultural, legal, and political and business environment in a group PowerPoint presentation with interactive exercises designed by the students. Each student team is assigned a specific country topic to research and present. Regardless of the business trip duration, studies show that successful global business programs need to involve students in immersion learning activities (Doyle, Helms and Westrup, (2004).

Homework assignments and class discussions may include panel discussions with role-plays as government officials, business representatives and NGOs. The role-play assignments require students to quickly integrate all facets of the economy as the first step in preparing for the role-play. The instructor may select an industry that is slowly developing and script out the issues and challenges this industry encounters in the country.

Another successful assignment is the case study method. The goal here is to assign cases with environmental, legal and/or managerial issues. These business issues in the cases should relate directly to the country's regulations or operation rules. The cases can involve team presentations to include identifying the current operating challenges the company is facing and/or the progress from the date of the case.

Class meetings and exercises work best with supplemental readings from required book excerpts and videos. If time allows, the pre-trip class meetings, role-plays, panel discussion on critical country issues and business cases provide an interactive forum and require students to research the country beyond just using travel sites or tourist links.

It is essential that the instructor design an integrated syllabus and not deviate from the business aspects of the course. It is sometimes very easy to become caught up in the students' excitement and direct greater time and attention to the cultural issues.

### **Pre-Trip Orientation Workshop**

The business trips at PBAU are unique in their level of student participation. Since the university is small (annual enrollment of 3,000 students) and the Rinker School of Business student enrollment is 350, the annual trip includes undergraduates, MBAs and alumni. Many of the alumni are repeat students who participated in a trip as an undergraduate and or MBA. In some cases, the alumni bring their spouses, and some alumni have attended 3 of the 4 global business trips. This type of repeat attendance results in loyal support and favorable student/alumni promotional support. The Global Business Dinner serves to unite the three groups and it provides a forum for communicating a unified trip message. A well-orchestrated and timed agenda is important for this meeting. Inviting guest speakers familiar with the host country combined with a question/answer session allows students to learn and reflect on the country. The Global Business Dinner is a good time to present the final agenda and the business visits. It

is also a good opportunity to preview the agenda, the accommodations, and the country activities.

### **Global Business Trip Visits**

Assessment objectives during the course's business trip should encourage and motivate students to participate in group activities, provide an opportunity to develop group leadership skills, understand the theory and reflect on their experiences. Journaling the day's event assists students to bring together theory and experience. Journaling, according to Connor-Greene (2000), requires students to make a connection between course content and materials outside the class. The journals prepare the student for the portfolio by serving as reflective review.

Involving the students in a community service project increases students' understanding of global poverty, builds a spirit of self-giving, teamwork and improved understanding of the world of social agencies. Team-led discussions in the form of debriefing sessions after the visits encourages students to share personal thoughts, ask questions in a smaller group environment and develop critical thinking skills.

### **Post-Global Trip Projects**

The third section of the business trip course design is linking the travel and business experience with the classroom theory discussed during the pre-trip assignments. A roundtable discussion kicks off the first meeting session. This discussion allows students to verbally express the highlights and make recommendations for future business trips. Once students share their concerns or dislikes about the trip, they are less inclined to talk about the small negative items and more emphasis is placed on the experiences and sites.

The second class after the return trip is the time to begin the acceptance of portfolio drafts (Table 2). A review of each draft for language, content and format results in well-structured and professional business portfolios. Students are encouraged to design the business trip portfolio with the objective of using this document during job interviews. Establishing a realistic professional work goal motivates students to take personal pride in the design and final project.

Sharing the business trip experience builds greater awareness for future business trip courses and improves overall university appreciation of the internalization of the business environment. These forums can be hosted by the lead faculty member and Faculty Development. Students may play an active role by participating in panel discussions, leading a group discussion in a roundtable format and presenting learning outcomes.

The last item in the course is selecting the outstanding portfolios. This can be accomplished by a committee made up of two or three faculty members. The rubric used for grading the student's portfolio may serve as a guideline for the faculty participating in selecting the outstanding portfolios (Table 3).

Portfolio Criteria  
Table 2

Executive Overview

- Summary of the trip - Books required for the course
- Agenda
- Map

Cairo- Personal Reflections

- A. Pre - Perceptions of Egypt
- B. How your perceptions changed after reading the Book
- C. How did the actual experience mirror the author's visual description of Egypt?

Political / Religious Perspective of the Middle East

- Timeline of the Middle East
- What are the issues from a historical to a current state of affairs?
- Relate the impact of the Islamic religion on the Middle East and why there are many cross-cultural views of the Muslim faith.

Business Visits

- Company name / date / Executives presenting
- Company Background
- Content Material Covered
- Personal Reflection of the Visit
- Reference-Contact List and Pre-Egypt Visits

Business and Economic Climate

- Progress of the country
- Changes in the country from a business perspective ( reforms)
- Challenges of doing business in Egypt
- World Bank rankings - Doing Business in Egypt
- Economic Indicators
- World Freedom Index indicator
- Transparency Index indicator

Cultural Reflections

- Cultural differences - gender differences-
- Dress differences- food differences- negotiations -
- Experiences from the trip relative to a cultural experience
- Cultural Visits

Case Analysis

- Attach case
- Case question Responses
- Summary of learning points from the case or your personal opinion of Middle East Challenges

Marketing in Egypt

- Visit a location of your choice - consumer oriented
- Select a product or portfolio of products
- Identify the differences in marketing in an Islamic country vs. the Western approach to marketing
- Lessons to learn in marketing to a Middle East Region
- Pictures of the products

Newspaper Clippings / Summaries of Articles

- Summarize the issues in the article and their relevance to politics and economics. Discuss this summary from an international global perspective by using a compare / contrast perspective.
- Include your personal perspective on each article with a recommendation for change or justification for the issue’s written perspective.

Personal Reflection

- When asked “how can you describe your business trip to Egypt,” how will you respond? Consider this question from the current perspective time frame and this question in 20 years. What has this business trip instilled in you personally, globally and from a business perspective?

Sample Rubric and Portfolio Assignment

Table 3

Final Project - Egypt and Middle East Business Portfolio  
Criteria for Portfolio Grading- Represents 50% Grade Average

% OF POINT ALLOCATIONS	Outstanding	Very Good	Good	Fair	Point Value
Executive Overview ( 5 points)					
Reflection – Cairo: The Mother of the World (10 points)					
Political and Religious Perspective of Middle East (10 points)					
Business /Cultural Visit Reflections (20 points)					

Business Climate (10 points)					
Cultural Reflections on Egypt (10 points)					
Case Analysis - Globalization and the Middle East (5 points)					
Marketing in Egypt (20 points )					
Newspaper Clippings and (5 points)					
Personal Conclusions: Reflections - ( 5 points)					

### Conclusion

As more universities are exploring shorter term study programs, the integration of a course and business trip component adds value to a student’s education. The shorter term trips cost less than a semester abroad. Studies are inconclusive on the best learning and cultural immersion time frame needed for a student to become culturally competent in another country.

Company visits are a selling point with students and parents. The business trips bring the business world to the students and provide a great learning experience. Students can prepare in advance for the business visits and develop useful questions for use during the question and answer program.

Designing the course content structure and integral project assignments assists the students in preparation and in the understanding of the learning objectives for the course. Students realize at the course’s conclusion that they participated in an once-in-a-lifetime learning experience and developed long lasting peer and in some cases business friendships.

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