

Athletes Abroad:

Launching a Study Abroad Initiative for Division 1 College Athletes

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Setting

The National Collegiate Athletics Administration (NCAA) governs collegiate athletics in the U.S. and has strict policies regarding what they refer to as “foreign tours.” The NCAA allows all teams from member institutions to participate in one foreign tour once every four years. These foreign tours must be conducted during the summer vacation break between an institution’s spring and fall terms or during an academic year vacation period (NCAA, 2023). Foreign tours are an opportunity for college athletes to participate in global learning as the time demands of their training often limit college athletes from participating in traditional study abroad programs. Scholars build on this approach and recommend that coaches, athletic administrators, faculty, and international offices work together to develop credit-bearing short-term programs that will fit within college athletes’ packed schedules, which include practices, contests, and academic commitments (Navarro et al., 2019).

The University of the Midwest (UM) has positioned itself as a leader in collegiate athletics on the field and in its college athlete development program, Athlete Career Transition Initiative (ACTive), which helps college athletes participate in job shadowing, career networking events, and internships. In addition to supporting students as they explore different career options, the ACTive program aims to help students develop leadership and other transferable skills that will help them on and off the field.

The Assistant Athletic Director (AAD) of Student-Athlete Development wanted to create a new initiative that would build cross-cultural skills and provide students with a global education. Considering that some coaches at UM had led foreign tours in the past, the AAD saw an opportunity to expand the program. Their goal was to increase the number of student-athletes traveling overseas and add an academic component to the athletic foreign tour by incorporating a UM credit-bearing class. This Athletes Abroad program could become a framework for future short-term international athletic programs for UM.

Case

The AAD began work to launch the Athletes Abroad (AA) program and develop two summer programs for the current year, one for the women's volleyball team in Brazil and another for the men's basketball team in Greece. They contacted the study abroad office and the Faculty Athletic Representative (FAR) to begin work.

The AA program was designed to benefit student-athletes both on and off the field and enhance the foreign tour program to maximize cultural immersion and academic value while also providing a meaningful athletic experience. They identified three principal learning outcomes for the new programs.

- **Intercultural Learning:** The student-athlete development staff worked with the study abroad office and the Faculty Athletic Representative (FAR) to create a course for the AA program entitled Intercultural Competencies: Culture, Leadership, and Diversity, which could be adapted to many locations around the world where UM teams pursue foreign tours. The FAR, a professor of education, worked with the study abroad office as well as faculty members in the fields of communication, international relations, history, sociology, and sport management to create assignments and activities appropriate for a short-term study abroad program.
- **Athletic Opportunity:** Working with coaches, the AA created foreign tours that maximized athletic opportunities, including competition with professional sports organizations, sports clubs, and in international college tournaments. For example, they scheduled students in the first iteration to play three contests against quality competition.
- **Career Development:** The AA program expanded the career and personal development focus on the ACTive program into the growth of cultural competencies by helping athletes broaden their global perspectives, navigate diverse environments, and consider international employment.

Taking NCAA rules into consideration, UM decided to offer the AA program to teams on a rotating basis, with two to four of the sixteen teams participating each year. This would increase the number of college athletes studying abroad for credit. Each program was structured to include four pre-departure class sessions, 10 days abroad (in addition to travel days), and two class sessions upon return.

The program development stage was not without obstacles. Although coaches had seen the benefit of foreign tours because they serve as great bonding experiences for teams, provide extra practice and competition days, and give the students exposure to new cultures and opportunities, not every coach at UM was excited about the prospect. Coaches questioned the quality of the competition faced during foreign tours as well as limitations related to facility access for strength and conditioning activities. In addition, they worried about the athletes' full calendar and the foreign tour potentially taking up what little "free" time the athletes had to spend with their families.

Despite these challenges, the first two AA programs ran and were impactful, with 28 college athletes traveling abroad and earning three credits while competing against strong competition. Students all reflected that the experience in a different culture provided them with new cross-cultural insights, offered career exploration, and highlighted the value of the foreign tour as a bonding experience for the entire team.

Reflecting on the first year, the AAD, the FAR, and the study abroad office recognized that there were additional challenges that needed to be overcome to create credit-bearing foreign tours for all UM student-athletes. In addition to addressing the coaches' concerns, there was a substantial increase in cost for incorporating a credit-bearing course into a foreign tour. Students paid more because of the tuition and faculty salary and travel costs. Furthermore, the first iteration of the program was completed using teams with smaller roster sizes; men's basketball had 13 players participate, and women's volleyball had 15 athletes travel abroad. Expanding to larger teams like track and field or football could create a challenge with travel logistics and the program cost may become out of reach. As the average faculty-led study abroad course at UM has 17 students enrolled, any larger course may also be unmanageable from an academic standpoint.

Another challenge was recruiting faculty. Although the FAR was willing to teach the course during the volleyball team's trip to Brazil, and they were also able to recruit a Classics professor to teach the course in Greece, recruiting faculty to lead trips and teach the courses each year could be challenging.

To deal with these challenges, the student-athlete development office employed several strategic approaches.

- To encourage coaches to participate in AA programs, the student-athlete development office worked with the study abroad office to create a workshop that explained the benefits for teams and athletes.
- Securing secure alternative funding sources was also a priority and required collaboration with the athletics department's fundraising office to muster donor support and corporate sponsors.
- The FAR helped to identify a potential pool of faculty who could lead AA trips in the future and helped to design professional development workshops that could train more faculty members to teach the course on international competencies.

Overall, the initiative was successful in creating a framework for future years. A syllabus and course model was created that could be used for future trips, and the AA program contributed to making international education more accessible for college athletes at UM. The student-athlete development office was proud of their achievement and looked forward to continuing to expand the program in future years.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What components contributed to the success of the first year of AA? What could UM do to improve?
- What opportunities are there for career development on a short-term program of this nature?
- How can UM overcome coach and faculty resistance to participating in the AA program?
- What strategies can UM employ to meet roster-size challenges for AA programs?
- What strategies can athletic departments explore to expand financial accessibility of foreign tours and credit-bearing programs for student-athletes?
- How could online courses, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), or virtual exchange (VE) be leveraged for college athletes?
- What should UM prioritize for the second year of the program?

References

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