

When Messages Get Murky:

Managing Expectations at Study Abroad Fairs

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Setting

“PAC” is a mid-size, private, four-year college located in the suburbs of a large southeastern U.S. city. The institution’s enrollment is approximately 10,000 undergraduate students. There is an international programs office on campus which manages study abroad opportunities for PAC students, including 50+ direct enrollment options, faculty-led group options, and several programs offered by third-party provider organizations.

The PAC international programs office is led by a director with a recently downsized staff of two full-time advisors and two part-time student employees. The students report to the advisors, while the advisors report to the director. The office downsizing was due to financial cuts across campus. A relatively new campus Provost does not place international study as a top priority but prefers a focus on incoming international students. PAC does not employ a Senior International Officer (SIO) or higher-level administrators related to international education. The director, Marcus, reports to the Vice Provost of Undergraduate Education.

Despite varying levels of support from campus administration over the years, the international programs office has a tradition of organizing a study abroad fair each fall semester. The fair is a festive event with free food, music, and at least ten tables set up outside in a large, open, centrally located area on the campus. The invited participants each have a table assigned to them and include relevant campus offices and staff, such as financial aid and academic advising, as well as international programs office staff, student alumni, and faculty.

The office's main goal for the fair is to recruit students for the college's partnership direct-enroll programs, faculty-led programs, and partner third-party provider organization programs (in that order of priority). In a good year, the office recruits 200 students to study abroad across programs. Since the 2020 COVID pandemic, the office has seen on average 100 students per year study abroad (a 50% decrease) despite ongoing outreach and recruiting.

Case

On a cloudy, hot, humid day in mid-September, PAC hosted a fair which included campus staff and three provider organizations with whom PAC has signed non-exclusive collaboration agreements. It was estimated that over 250 students stopped by the fair (based on how much free pizza was distributed). Students were asked to provide their names, email address or social media handles, but there were only 52 names collected. It is common that not all students leave their contact information at the PAC fair. As a result, it is difficult for staff to gauge an accurate number of how many students attended or are genuinely interested in studying abroad.

The office regularly relies on student alumni to work part-time. At the time of the fair, there were two employed students who each worked in the office approximately 12-15 hours per week. The two students had studied abroad on PAC programs – one (Marley) on a direct enrollment semester program in Seoul, South Korea, and one (Sophia) on a third-party provider's semester program in Prague, Czech Republic. One of the providers which PAC invited to the fair also offers their own programs in both Seoul and Prague. The cost of the provider's two programs was approximately \$2,500 less than the PAC program fee for the same locations, with comparable program length, credits, and services included such as housing and health insurance.

Marcus, the PAC office director, required the two advisors and two student employees to work at the fair. They were told to promote all of PAC's programs and to share their own study abroad experiences in an effort to recruit students. While at the fair conversing with prospective students, Marley, the student employee who attended the lower-cost provider program in South Korea, mentioned the cost difference to a prospective student who was interested in the same program location.

When Marcus became aware of this, he reprimanded Marley for openly sharing the cost difference information. He said to an advisor that he was concerned with the potential damage to the reputation of the office. Marcus did not give an explanation when the student employee asked why there was a cost difference between the PAC program and the provider program. The student employee was not clear if there were factors such as institutional overhead or other campus requirements that needed to be taken into account when pricing PAC programs. This topic was not part of the onboarding when student employees were hired and was not discussed openly in the office.

At the end of the semester, Marley was not re-hired when her employment contract was up for possible renewal. She was not given a reason but accepted Marcus's decision and moved on to work in another office on campus. Marcus did not contact the program provider in question; however, he told an advisor in the office not to invite program providers with lower program fees to the next fair.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- Are study abroad fairs useful for promoting international programs and recruiting students? What are some benefits and challenges? How can institutions attract students to on-campus fairs and gather students' contact information?
- Are there ethical or other concerns about having study abroad alumni participate as staff at campus events? What sample guidelines would be helpful for alumni to receive when placed in a recruiting environment?
- What preparation and expectation-setting should be provided for participants (students, staff, invited guests such as campus offices and providers) at fairs?
- What should the training process look like for student employees? What level of transparency and level of detail should be shared with student employees?
- What dilemmas can occur if institutions offer multiple program options in the same international location – such as both “homegrown” and provider programs – especially if the programs have differing costs? How could communication, promotion, and expectation-building be managed in this case? What obligations do institutions have regarding transparency of prices?
- What factors and needs (of the campus, office, students, faculty, etc.) should institutions take into consideration when choosing partnerships with third-party provider organizations, direct enrollment options, faculty-led options, and other forms of international programming?
- If you were the principal decision-maker in the campus international programs office, and were required to downsize your program portfolio strategically, which factors would you take into consideration?