

You've Won the Lottery: Staff Capacity Limitations End High-Contact Selection

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Tags

Education Abroad; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Management and Operations; Student Services; Technology; University/Higher Education

Setting

This case takes place within a large public university's business school that enrolls approximately 550–650 undergraduate students per cohort. The school maintains a small, dedicated global programs office that manages study abroad opportunities for business students. This office operates separately from the university's central study abroad office, granting it partial autonomy over advising and program oversight.

Among its offerings, a ten-week program in Western Europe has earned enduring popularity and strong student word-of-mouth. Each term, about 100-200 applicants compete for 20–30 available spaces. For many years, the global programs office coordinators have manually reviewed application essays and conducted group interviews of all candidates. There is an initial selection and then several rounds of selection from a lengthy waitlist, when initial offers are not accepted. This process can take several months. Applicants who are not selected sometimes then apply to other available study abroad programs, but others elect to stay on the home campus. Unfortunately, other programs are left wondering if they will be able to meet their enrollment minimums as the selection process drags on and they wait in hopes of waitlist referrals.

Case

To address both staff workload capacity and equitable admission considerations, the business school's global programs office implemented several procedural changes in collaboration with the third-party provider. The most significant adjustment was replacing the traditional essay-and-interview selection process with a randomized lottery system. This shift aimed to reduce staff workload and eliminate implicit bias in selection outcomes. This reform reflects principles of procedural fairness and efficiency but may also reduce opportunities for student engagement, as suggested by Astin's Theory of Involvement (1984). Early results indicated that admitted students' GPA distribution and other demographic characteristics remained consistent with prior application cycles.

Additionally, the office transitioned from in-person pre-departure orientations to asynchronous virtual modules. Previously, these sessions provided opportunities for discussion-based learning and activities related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in intercultural contexts. While effective, the sessions required substantial staff time and coordination. The pre-recorded format was introduced to streamline operations and ensure consistent content delivery across terms.

Over successive application cycles, several unintended consequences became apparent. Without in-person interactions, students demonstrated lower engagement with informational materials, resulting in repetitive advising questions – especially about course approvals, degree applicability, and funding. The reduction in staff-to-student contact also limited opportunities for holistic assessment of student readiness. The loss of synchronous dialogue lessened chances for intercultural reflection and ethical advising conversations that shape professional readiness. This shift challenged the advisor's understanding of their role as a mentor who cultivates student learning and self-authorship.

An additional trend involved a modest increase in applicants with prior academic or conduct concerns. Although all students are screened and cleared by the university's central study abroad office, the absence of interviews and live discussions made it more difficult for program staff to qualitatively evaluate individual motivation and growth. In earlier cycles, students met multiple times with program coordinators through interviews, advising appointments, and in-person orientations. These touchpoints helped establish rapport, set expectations, and foster community among participants. Under the virtual model, student responsiveness declined. Fewer students completed required provider registration and visa documentation by the established deadlines, and withdrawals later in the process became more frequent.

Both the coordinator and provider noted that especially when it came to steps where both the provider and university study abroad office had to enforce contractual accountability of pre-departure tasks, student accountability appeared to have weakened. This raised concerns that the loss of personal connection and real-time engagement might be contributing to procedural noncompliance and reduced overall preparedness.

Despite these challenges, the procedural changes also yielded notable benefits. The randomized selection process improved perceptions of fairness and transparency, while simultaneously reducing staff workload and burnout. It is important to acknowledge any reduction in institutional and individual constraints, as burnout and

workload for program coordination can directly lead to staff turnover, causing a reduction in consistent staff support to students overall.

Furthermore, the lottery system resulted in a quicker turnaround on the secondary selections, making the waitlist and selection process much shorter. As a result, students not selected in the lottery maintained their enthusiasm and still opted to study abroad. They showed increased openness to other locations. As more students participated in study abroad programs beyond Western Europe, word-of-mouth helped to promote these destinations further and enrollment patterns across the portfolio became more balanced.

Looking forward, the office must choose whether to continue with the reforms, go back to the previous system, or find a third way forward.

Discussion Questions

- What were the advantages and disadvantages of the high contact selection process (essays, interviews, etc.)? What are the advantages and disadvantages of the lottery selection process? Is there a selection process that combines the advantages of both, while mitigating the disadvantages of both?
- What educational or social theories would or could guide decisions about which selection process to utilize?
- What blend of in-person, live virtual, and asynchronous components best supports student engagement, accountability, and preparedness?
- How can a small global programs office balance staff capacity with the individualized student support usually associated with high-impact learning experiences?
- To what extent are these challenges unique to this program, or do they reflect broader trends in student engagement and advising across higher education?