

Creating Meaningful Study Abroad Programs for American Indian Postsecondary Students



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This article describes the development of a study abroad exchange experience for American Indian students enrolled at Haskell Indian Nations University, Lawrence, Kansas, and Altaian students enrolled at Gorno-Altai State University, Altai Republic, Siberia. Students and faculty engaged in numerous activities designed to develop mentored learning experiences, connectedness with the greater Indigenous community, and knowledge and experience for students working in various areas of science and liberal arts.

Introduction

Most universities and colleges in the United States offer their students opportunities to study in different countries around the world. From their inception these programs have offered students forms of social and cultural capital that are valued in the global market (University of Georgia, 2000; University of Memphis, 2002; University of Pittsburg, 2003). Knowledge of other cultures and social norms, opportunities to achieve fluency in a foreign language, and insights into the socio-political nature of different governments support these students' future positions as cultural and social brokers for their employers (University of Memphis, 2002; University of Pittsburgh, 2003).

Opportunities for study-abroad exist at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Funding mechanisms for such study include monies from the National Security Education Programs, the Fulbright-Hays Foundation, Corporation for National Service, and many federal agencies (e.g., United States Department of Agriculture). The vast majority of students taking advantage of these programs are students from Euro-American backgrounds. Study abroad program directors

have reported that in recent years the number of minority students choosing to study abroad has declined from 16.2% to 15.5% (Perdreau, 2002). This has been accompanied by an increase in the number of Euro-American students within those study abroad programs (Perdreau, 2002). Although the source of this decrease is unknown, Perdreau (2002) suggested a variety of factors as discussed in the following section.

Perdreau (2002) found that the primary barriers to study abroad programs for students from ethnic minority backgrounds have been that (a) students may not believe studying abroad is a meaningful experience and an important part of obtaining a degree, (b) students frequently have concerns about how they will be accepted in other countries as ethnic minorities, and (c) students from ethnic minority cultures frequently do not have the funding that would make such study possible. Recognizing the need for increased diversity in the workforce, recruiters for many study abroad programs have decided independently to increase their efforts to enroll students from ethnic minority groups or are being directed to do so at the college, state, and federal levels (University of Georgia, 2000; Perdreau, 2002).

In essence, for Euro-American students, the opportunity to engage in a study abroad program may be envisioned as an opportunity to train individuals to further privilege American institutions whose employees (e.g., corporations, think-tanks, and academic institutions) work in a particular country or group of countries delivering Western culture (Brandeis University, online, n.d.; Carlsen, 2002; Marist College, 2002; Pratt Institute, online, n.d.; University of Memphis, 2002; University of Pittsburgh, 2003). The assumption that study abroad programs provide opportunities to further the privileges of corporate America, whether true or false, stands in contrast to many American Indian values (e.g., developing exchanges that equally privilege all shareholders; Merlan, 1997; Smith & Ward, 2001). Pan-national alliances might be better described as serving mutual needs and not benefiting one side to the exclusion of the other(s). For example, the Acoma Pueblo Tribe, among others, offers individuals opportunities to visit the Pueblo for the purposes of learning more about language preservation (James, 2000). This type of exchange benefits both groups equally.

For American Indian students, especially those enrolled in Tribal Colleges or Universities (TCUs), most opportunities to study abroad are infrequent and generally not available through sustained programs within their institutions. Tribal Colleges or Universities continue to struggle to be funded at a survival level (personal communication, Susan Faircloth, Director of Policy Analysis and Research, American Indian Higher Education Consortium) and currently operate on a funding level of \$3,916 per Indian student count (ISC). This stands in stark contrast to the average funding budget of \$7,000 per full time equivalent (FTE) in community colleges (Fann, 2002). In addition, many American Indian students attend nearby Tribal or Community Colleges as commuters. Many students often have family and work commitments that may limit their time for traditional study abroad programs when those programs require students to travel for long periods of time. These students may enter college in order to return to or stay in their

home communities where they may work to improve the future of their tribes and tribal communities.

For many American Indian college students the purpose of studying abroad may be viewed as culturally meaningless. For example, the idea of studying in Europe is not likely to appeal to American Indian students for a number of reasons. Many American Indian students view Europe as the homeland of the colonizer and the colonial culture. For these reasons, some organizations that sponsor study abroad opportunities have recognized the need to develop meaningful programs in which both cultural experiences and service learning are included.

A well planned study abroad program can address American Indian community-based learning needs. Finding communities in which American Indian students share some common characteristics may help students from both communities self-assess their experiences as more meaningful to their educational goals. The question that needs to be addressed is: "How can we create meaningful programs for studying abroad that address culturally and intellectually relevant needs among American Indian students and scholars?" Given this question, we decided to work towards the development of a specific model that would create a meaningful study abroad program for American Indian students.

Global American Indian Issues as a Focus of Study

Despite relocations, both forced and voluntary, American Indian people take their knowledge with them. This has allowed them to survive decimation, relocation, and urbanization and has allowed them to reestablish sacred places in their new homes. The basis of American Indian thought includes the following concepts: (a) local places and the natural environment are of utmost importance to cultural identity, (b) respect for nonhuman entities as fully competent individuals, (c) the existence of bonds between humans and nonhumans, including incorporation of nonhumans into ethical codes of behavior, and (d) recognition of humans as part of the ecological system, rather than as separate from and defining that system (Basso, 1996).

Worldviews that involve representing sound ecological management in strongly ethical (spiritual) terms, and developing views of the environment that stress specific bonds between nature and the human community are consonant with American Indian philosophy and other Indigenous philosophies (Deloria, 1990; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; Pierotti & Wildcat, 1997b; Pierotti & Wildcat, 1999). These constructs represent both scientific and spiritual knowledge, are a full representation of the community as an ecological unit, and create devices for sanctioning moral and ethical codes. "The task of the tribal religion . . . is to determine the proper relationship that the people must have with other living beings" (Deloria, 1992, p. 130). As a result, a large part of Indigenous knowledge from other tribal communities, like American Indian knowledge, is based on and has considerable insight into the workings of nature (Klubnikin, Annett, Cherkasova, Shishin, & Fotieva, 2000).

With the resurgence and return to educational opportunity based on traditional wisdom, knowledge, oratory, science, and art in place at many Tribal Colleges and or Universities, many American Indian students are engaged in pursuing information that relates to their continuing search for cultural relevance. Study abroad programs can be developed in which American Indian students are able to develop cultural and social capital by engaging in study abroad programs that enhance their knowledge and ability to work in their own communities, yet maintain American Indian ways of being (Tilgner, 2002).

The ideas discussed above are representative of those that lead students to select specific coursework that will be meaningful to them in cultural, spiritual, and pragmatic ways that allow them to return to work and live in their communities. Within many American Indian communities issues related to ecological health (e.g., water quality, air quality, and soil and forestry conditions) are primary issues of concern. Creating a study abroad program that supports American Indian students' desire to examine issues related to those that are valued and experienced in their home communities became the focus of our work to develop this study abroad program.

Creating a Meaningful Program

In 1999, faculty from Gorno-Altai State University, Haskell Indian Nations University (HINU), Kansas State University (KSU), and Kansas University (KU) joined together to create a partnership to address water quality issues common to both the Russian Federation and the United States. With initial funding from the United States Agency for International Development/Association Liaison Office, we began engaging in activities to develop a model program for the monitoring of community-based drinking water quality in remote villages in the Altai Republic of Russia. The focus of this initiative was to develop a study abroad program that would be culturally relevant to American Indian populations, particularly those living in remote areas.

As part of this project we developed interactions between Indigenous people of the Altai region of Southwestern Siberia and Native American faculty and students from Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kansas. The Haskell contingent represented a variety of tribes, including Euclidean, Potawatomi, Taos Pueblo, Lakota, Cherokee, Shoshone, Chickasaw, and Comanche. In the summer of 2001, two faculty and six students from Haskell traveled to the Altai region of Siberia; and in the spring of 2002, four faculty and four students from Gorno-Altai State University in the Altai visited Kansas.

Over the course of three years, the partnership provided training to participants from the Russian and United States partner institutions in scientifically rigorous water quality assessment methodology and in capturing and interpreting traditional ecological knowledge. We have also provided training modules suitable for use by elementary and secondary schoolteachers and community groups who will form a water quality monitoring network in the Altai Republic. University students from both sites have been active participants in

these projects, including the development of research proposals, report writing, panel presentations, and media appearances. This project initiated a technical environmental extension capacity at Gorno-Altai State University and provided the first international student and faculty exchange for Haskell Indian Nations University. An overview of this initiative is provided below.

Year One: October 1999-September 2000

During Year One, project goals included the development of institutional structures and structural capacity for student exchanges, initiation of faculty exchanges, and identification of appropriate methods and tools for initiating a community-based drinking water quality analysis program. The student selection process also began at Gorno-Altai State University. In November 1999, approximately 100 second-year students in the biology and chemistry department were given a description of the project and learned about the requirements needed for their participation. One month later, these students met with representatives from United States partner institutions.

The application process for Haskell students interested in participating in the summer 2001 exchange activities also began during the first year. Students who had expressed an interest in traveling to the Altai were required to enroll in spring and fall semester courses targeted at expanding their knowledge of Russian and Siberian history, ecology, culture, and language. During these classes, students engaged in activities such as researching and reporting on Russian current events, initiating communication with their fellow students at Gorno-Altai State University, and reading and discussing a variety of topics, including economics, environmental issues, and health. Students were encouraged to contrast and compare their lives with that of Russians in general and Indigenous Altaians in particular. Haskell students learned basic conversational Russian from graduate students and faculty from the Center for Russian and East European Studies, University of Kansas.

Year Two: September 2000 through August 2001

During this second year we continued to develop the methods and tools for initiating a community-based drinking water quality analysis program, and facilitated the first exchange visit between Haskell faculty and students and the Altai Republic. During the spring semester of 2001, fifteen students in the biology and chemistry department at Gorno-Altai State University completed an additional course in the English language and American culture. Students were required to write essays on environmental issues. A faculty committee selected four students to participate in the fieldwork with American students. These students also had a chance to communicate with the Haskell students while they worked in Gorno-Altai. A number of English-language students helped in this communication during the summer 2001 trip.

The Haskell student selection process for the summer 2001 exchange was completed during the second year. Five students and two alternates were selected.

With newly obtained funds from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), we were also able to fully fund the two alternates' participation in the exchange program. The funds from the USDA grant also provided stipends for two student participants, increasing our capacity for scientific analysis of the water quality data collected during the course of the project. The study abroad program was enhanced by the participation of a Chickasaw graduate student from the University of Kansas, Jennifer Ivie. Ms. Ivie was awarded a National Security Education Programs Graduate Fellowship (NSEP) to study at Gorno-Altai State University. One of the goals of this United States Agency for International Development/ Association Liaison Office and the Environmental Protection Agency sponsored program was to develop an understanding of the linkages between water quality degradation and health. This formed the basis for Ms. Ivie's National Security Education Program application. Ms. Ivie, who worked with Dr. Anne Calhoon, compiled and analyzed data collected by Dr. Tatiana Lukyanenko, a faculty member at Gorno-Altai State University. Ms. Ivie also worked closely with the Haskell Indian Nations University undergraduates during their stay in the Altai Republic.

Year Three: October 2001-September 2002

The student selection process at Gorno-Altai State University was concluded during fall 2001. Four biology and chemistry students, one language student, and one alternate language student were selected to participate in the exchange during the third year. Among the requirements for the Gorno-Altai students were the following criteria: (a) active participation in the scientific work of the department; (b) proficiency in English; (c) ability to work in a group; and (d) communication skills. Two of the biology students were unable to participate in the exchange due to family and health problems. As a result, the alternate language student was added to the final list.

During May of 2002, four faculty/administrators and four students from Gorno-Altai State University visited their Kansas partners at four educational institutions: Haskell Indian Nations University, Kansas University, Bethany College, and Kansas State University. During the visit to Haskell, the delegation from the Altai Republic participated in activities that allowed them to explore the connections between the traditional belief systems of North American Native Peoples and Indigenous Siberians. They considered how Traditional Knowledge can be used to inform scientific studies of environmental problems. Dan Wildcat (Haskell Indian Nations University) led the group in an exploration of environmental issues relevant to many North American Indian Nations. This exploration included a tour of the Haskell wetlands and the Haskell medicine wheel. The wetlands are an important Haskell resource that is also used as an outdoor lab for science courses. The area also has spiritual significance for the Haskell community because it represents a place for spiritual retreat, celebration, and gathering. The Medicine Wheel is recognized nationally as a site of cultural significance to American Indians. The Indigenous Altai also have symbols whose function is similar to the idea of Medicine Wheels.

Faculty also toured the Kansas River and met with non-governmental organization (NGOs) representatives to discuss techniques and strategies for preserving rivers and protecting water quality. The American partners were subsequently asked to provide training in water quality monitoring and education to members of NGOs interested in conserving rivers in Kansas. The Altai Republic delegation visited the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation. They toured a riverbank filtration project and discussed how this could be used as one possible solution to water quality issues in the Altai Republic.

Specific Activities Within the Model

During the fieldwork, the American group collected water samples from Altai National Park water sources. They spent three days in the field and were joined by a group of about 50 high school students from all over the Republic who were attending an environmental camp. Samples of water were collected from the local river, streams, and other natural sources of water. The tests were conducted immediately after the samples were collected. The results of these tests were provided to representatives of the local natural reserve, a body of representatives for Altaians similar to a tribal council. Ten chemistry kits were also donated to the reserve for future tests. We felt that it was very important that local people, especially those who represented the state reserve, participate in the testing and discussion of the results so they can conduct similar tests in the future. It was also very educational for local students to discuss the water quality and the way water resources can be preserved. Similar water sampling and testing were conducted at water sources such as Lake Teletskoye, springs and wells in surrounding regions, and within the city of Gorno-Altai.

During the visit to the Republic, Haskell and Gorno Altai University participants had numerous opportunities to learn about their different cultures. For example, they viewed and discussed the movie *Smoke Signals*, toured the Republic museum to see displays of anthropology and natural history, attended an Altaian cultural festival, and viewed displays of American Indian cultures. Haskell students and faculty demonstrated American Indian dancing and traditions at the Altaian cultural festival. When traveling to the Ongudai Region, the delegation received a traditional welcome at Seminski Pass and attended a cultural presentation at the Altai National Park. The cultural presentation focused on traditional Altaian stories and songs.

Important Outcomes of This Collaboration

Many of the American Indian students in the program had opportunities to build professionally and culturally relevant experiences. Student panel presentations included *World Geography*: Dustina Edmo (Shoshone), Krystale Head (Cherokee), Stefanie Reyna (Taos Pueblo), Sheldon Selwyn (Nakota), and Marei Spaola (Lakota), and Jennifer Ivie (Chickasaw). Panelists discussed their experiences participating in the summer 2001 Altai Republic trip. Student publications include reports on science and culture by a Haskell student Sheldon

Selwyn (Nakota) and Victor Mamrashev from the Altai region that will be published in *Earth Island Journal*.

Exploring the cultural connections between Indigenous Altaians and American Indian peoples was an important part of the learning experience. Approximately 30% of the Altai Republic's population (and Gorno-Altai State University's student body) is made up of Indigenous Altaians. Haskell Indian Nations University has a 100% tribal enrollment and serves all federally recognized Nations including Alaskan Native Corporations.

Altaian students from partner institutions were also able to gain insight into some common issues shared by American Indian cultures. Students found that both American Indians and Indigenous Altaians hold common beliefs about the sacredness of water. In both the United States and Russia, water sources on homelands were kept pristine and healthy for thousands of years, yet today many have become too polluted to directly drink from. From an American Indian perspective, water is considered a sacred element, so testing for pollution means more than simply a scientific endeavor. Working on water quality issues together helped students identify their shared traditional ecological values, take joint steps to educate younger people, and to improve their drinking water.

American Indian students and Altaian students also shared cultural traditions, such as songs, dances, and stories about the natural world. While in the Altai Republic, American Indian students were able to convey culturally appropriate and historically accurate information about their individual Nations. They were also able to receive similar information about Altaian culture and history. Each group of students attended several cultural events while visiting in the Altai Republic and in Kansas. Sheldon Selwyn, from Haskell Indian Nations University and a member of the Yankton Sioux Tribe, commented that

the most obvious similarity between the Altai People and Native American People is the interaction between the people and their environments. Traditional ceremonies have common interests in a way that enables communities to care for their environments. We also share interests in preserving our land for future generations and deal with environmental problems with limited resources. A great deal of respect is also given to the elders of the Tribes in both countries. In return for respecting elders is an exchange of knowledge that the elders have been given by their ancestors. The Altaian country is not developed land and is kept pure so that the processes of Mother Earth can work naturally, as it is for most places in Indian Country where Native Americans have had the opportunity to keep their sacred sites clean. (Selwyn, in press)

Likewise, Victor Mamrashev from the Altai region, commented that

since the beginning of time people living close to nature have always had a special attitude with regard to nature, no matter whether they were American Indian people of America or Altai. Every natural object was assumed to have a spirit and a soul, and also to be cognizant. Every natural phenomenon was given a mysterious or spiritual component. This attitude generated respect for every living and non-living thing. People were eager

to live in harmony with nature, to be part of nature, and not above it. That is why they did not experience what the Western way of thought considers to be environmental problems. Notwithstanding the good aims of contemporary society, combined with deep knowledge of ecology, biology, and climate science, we cannot precisely predict the possible consequences of what people do. Nature remains always more farsighted and wise than humans, patiently checking our mistakes. It manages to sustain itself and us, yet sometimes it fails. How long can it continue? That is why we should start respecting it again like our ancestors always did. (Mamrashev, in press)

Key Components of Developing Model: Mentoring, Connectedness, and Creating New Knowledge

Though this initiative, we found that mentoring students was a key component to creating a sense of community, security, and connectedness among the faculty and students from each of the institutions. This experience in coordinating international travel between the partner institutions has demonstrated that we can successfully mentor American Indian and Indigenous Siberian science students who have no previous travel experience. Providing intensive mentoring by experienced faculty members enabled us to overcome significant cultural, economic, and social constraints that might otherwise have prevented our students from participation in this international exchange. We are continuing to work in this fashion and have obtained additional funds to provide travel for faculty and students from Gorno Altaisk State University and Haskell Indian Nations University each summer. We have found that one or two students per faculty member is ideal for the difficult travel within Russia and for the level of mentoring that our students require in an international setting. We have also concluded that the exchanges work best when the students and faculty know and trust each other.

Maintaining connectedness among partners and participants during and after these first four years is another key component of this model. Connectedness can be identified as one important type of socio-cultural capital necessary for American Indians and others who are working both within their Nations and pan-nationally. In addition to direct communication through meetings that involve international travel, we maintain contact between investigators and between students through a variety of media. International activities include regular email communication between cooperating investigators on projects that are of mutual interest, communication through the exchange of manuscripts and possible collaboration on manuscripts, and virtual conferences that make use of the Internet to post manuscripts and email to discuss the content of the manuscripts. These experiences help students build professional skills and a record of professional involvement in international studies and degree specified courses.

Documenting travel, study, and learning goals of students and faculty was another key component of our model. We developed a documentary of the historic exchange between two institutions that serve Indigenous populations, Haskell Indian Nations University and Gorno-Altaisk State University. This

documentary incorporated over 1,000 digital images collected during the 2001 exchange as well as several hours of digital video taken during the 2002 exchange. We also developed interactive online materials for the new International Program at Haskell Indian Nations University. This program began with a course on world geography and a course on the worldviews of American Indian People (American Indian Studies: Native and Western Views of Nature), and has expanded to include international travel for Haskell students and faculty (funded by grants from the United States Agency for International Development [USAID], United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], and the Environmental Protection Agency [EPA]). We also developed a website with funding from National Endowment for the Humanities ("Technical support for international coursework development for Tribal Colleges," ID No. HI-20860-01). This website is now used to supplement the world geography course. The lectures presented by international visitors and the trips by Haskell personnel led to a groundswell of interest in international exchanges among Haskell students. To address this need, we propose to develop online materials that will provide students with the materials they need to successfully apply for international exchanges, focusing on opportunities to work with Indigenous people in other countries.

Summary

During the four years of development of this project, numerous individuals, students, and faculty gave their time and energy to create a positive learning experience for students who were the direct beneficiaries of this program. In doing so, we have come to realize that this communal model for study abroad works well for our American Indian students and for their Altaian peers. The emphasis on learning language, cultural and social mores, organizational skills for traveling abroad, and patience throughout the entire venture have given our students the opportunity to demonstrate traditional American Indian values including wisdom, generosity, courage, and respect. Other key components, maintaining connectedness and documenting new knowledge and experience, are also based on Traditional Values that acknowledge the interdependence of all life in the world and beyond it. Through this exchange, students and faculty have discovered the common values and beliefs that unite us as people who respect our living mother, the Earth.

We implemented this program through funding, prior Siberian research contacts, and a knowledgeable faculty. This type of program could be implemented in other sites by negotiating with four-year colleges and universities who have already developed study abroad programs or service learning projects. There are also private organizations that can provide such assistance. The key to this successful project was the level of mentoring and the opportunity to travel as a group. These two components helped students feel supported and gave them access to others during the stresses of the trip. They also were able to build a lifetime of shared experiences and memories to build new stories of Indigenous travels.

Anne Calhoon (Cherokee) is an assistant professor at the University of New Mexico with a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology. Her primary area of research and teaching is in early reading processes. She currently teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in literacy.

Dan Wildcat (Euchee) is a professor of American Indian Studies and codirector of the Haskell Environmental Research Studies Center at HINU. Wildcat holds an MA in sociology and is completing a Ph.D. in public administration. He is coauthor with Vine Deloria, Jr., of the book *Power and Place: Indian Education in America*.

Cynthia Annett is a Research Associate at Kansas State University in the Biology Department. Annett holds a Ph.D. in aquatic ecology. She has worked with the Russian Academy of Sciences on scientific exchanges since 1991.

Ray Pierotti (Comanche) is an Associate Professor at the University of Kansas and teaches adjunct courses at Haskell Indian Nations University. He has been awarded two NSF Training grants used for mentoring American Indian students whose goals are to enter into a career in science.

Wendy Griswold holds an MS in Women's Studies and is currently pursuing a doctorate in Adult Education. In the past she has worked as a management coordinator for the Haskell Environmental Research Studies program.

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