

Maymester Study Abroad to Carpi, Italy for Education Majors

Need for Education Majors to Study Abroad: American schools are becoming increasingly diverse in relation to students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. For example, 42% of students in kindergarten through grade 12 are considered part of a racial/ethnic minority group, which represents a 22% increase between 1972 and 2005 (U.S. DOE & NCES, 2007). Further, the same source indicates that approximately 1 of every 5 students speak a language other than English at home. In contrast to this increasing diversity, approximately 83% of teachers are classified as White non-Hispanic (Strizek, Pittsonberger, Riordan, Lyter, & Orlofsky, 2006). Standards for teacher education programs now require pre-service teachers to be familiar with and responsive to multicultural issues. For example, the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) mandates that approved programs provide teacher candidates with experiences working with culturally and linguistically diverse students and that programs foster candidates abilities to teach from multicultural and global perspectives (NCATE, 2006). Providing pre-service teachers with a study abroad in a non-English speaking country that is built around working in schools, has the potential to facilitate participants' (a) authentic understandings of multicultural issues, (b) first-hand experience of learning in an environment in which they do not speak the language of instruction, and (c) knowledge and disposition for engaging in culturally responsive teaching. In brief, such an experience is likely to have definitive, direct, and long-term effects on the professional lives of the participants. Yet, the *Open Doors Report on International Education Exchange, 2007* indicates that only 4.1% of U.S. students studying abroad are majoring in education, and it is unlikely that the participation of this relatively small percentage of students involves the powerful cultural experience of living with a local host family and working substantively in local schools.

Program Description: The Maymester Study Abroad to Carpi, Italy for Education Majors is a 4-week program that involves pre-service teachers from several U.S. universities. Our program is unique because each student spends approximately 70 – 80 hours in an Italian classroom (preK – grade 8), working with children and teachers. They are not simply observers in classrooms, but are required to prepare lessons to assist Italian children learn English and about American culture. They also participate in a variety of other activities that do not require fluency in Italian (e.g., math, art, and physical education). Further, the program is unique because each student is placed with a volunteer host family so that they are fully immersed in the Italian culture, as opposed to staying in dorms or hotels/hostels. Because this program is offered immediately at the end of the spring semester, it does not interfere with the “lock-step” cohort approach employed by most teacher preparation programs or delay students progress towards graduation.

Inception and Expansion. This program was originally developed for students majoring in early childhood or elementary school education and Italy was chosen as the host country because of its renowned programs for young children (e.g., the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches). However, to meet the needs and interest of students majoring in middle and secondary education the program was expanded. This program now serves students majoring in early childhood, elementary, middle and secondary education, as well as in special education.

Collaboration. The program is conducted in collaboration with the Victoria Language and Culture Centre (VLC). VLC is a local agency that provides English language lessons and translation services to the local school district, businesses, and the community, as well as facilitating international student exchanges. Further, the program collaborates with the Circolo III School District, which places participants in approximately 18 schools in and around Carpi.

Student Preparation. Each December, prior to departure, students begin participating in approximately 30 hours of meetings and activities. For example, they participate in discussions of topics such as culture shock, Italian customs and culture, living with a host family, working in an

Italian class, and teaching English, and Italian customs and culture. Among several assignments, students read a book about an American's experience living in Italy or an Italian's experience living in the U.S, as well as articles related to topics such as language development, ethnographic observations, race and racism, and culturally responsive teaching. Further, students participate in 15 – 20 hours of non-credit basic Italian. The meetings and activities are designed to prepare students for their experience in each of the following cornerstone areas of the program:

Family. Each participant is placed with an Italian host family carefully screened by VLC and matched to students based on an extensive application completed both by families and students. Families volunteer to host an American student for many reasons, but typically they are motivated by desiring a cross cultural exchange and sharing of cultures. Students are "adopted" by families and participate in daily activities such as grocery shopping, cooking, and attending after-school activities. Further, because two weekends during the program are spent with families, participants often take weekend trips to the countryside, mountains, seaside, or visit other cities with their family, as well as participate in special occasions such as birthdays and first communions.

Education. Participants are placed in an Italian classroom where they make assigned systematic ethnographic observations for which they have been prepared, work with students and support teachers to the extent possible given the language difference, and teach English under the directions of an Italian teacher of English. In addition to their class placement, participants visit other schools on some afternoons. For example, they may visit a preschool that embraces a philosophy similar to the Reggio Emilia schools or a Montessori school, and tour a middle school and interact with Italian students. Participants also visit one or more secondary schools such as (a) a high school where students study electrical engineering and fashion/consumer sciences; (b) an agricultural high school where students learn how to produce products of the region such as parmesan cheese and balsamic vinegar; and, (c) a technical high school where students study auto mechanics and mechanical engineering. Further, participants majoring in secondary education spend a full day visiting a local high school. Finally, some participants spend a full day at a school renowned in Italy for serving children to young adults with severe disabilities.

Language. By studying in a non-English speaking country, participants experience many of the same challenges that English language learners' face living, working, and attending school in the United States. We have data suggesting that prior to our arrival, participants often believe that they will learn enough Italian during the study abroad to engage in conversations with their host family or with teachers and children in the schools but quickly realize that learning another language is difficult. However, participants do learn that with persistence and a sense of humor, they can communicate basic needs with their family, teachers, children, and local merchants.

Community and Culture. In addition to participating in community activities with their family, activities are planned to help participants better understand community life in Carpi. For example, some participants give a dramatic performance at the local library, while other participants visit a community and art center. All participants visit a local museum to learn about the history of Carpi, a museum in memory of the Holocaust (a concentration camp was located on the outskirts of Carpi), and Terramara, an archeological site that has planned interactive experiences for children. Further, participants learn about Italy and Italians by visiting Florence one weekend and Venice another weekend. While in Florence, students visit the Uffizi Museum and participate in hiking or cooking during an optional excursion to the Tuscan countryside. In Venice, students tour the Doge's Palace and have free time to explore other cultural and historical sites.

Participants: Thirty-nine students participated in the 2008 program but since the inception of the program in 2000, 165 individuals have participated. Participants have been students from Clemson University, University of Kansas, College of Charleston, University of Georgia, University of Missouri, University of North Carolina, University of Virginia, Louisiana State University, and

Pittsburg State University. Most participants have been undergraduates majoring in education but several have been graduate students pursuing a master's or doctoral degree. Students enrolled in Call Me Mister, a program that encourages African American men to pursue careers in education, are actively recruited and the program has provided them with some financial support. Further, in 2008, a retired teacher participated in the program to help us explore the possibility of collaborating with the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, a nation-wide program for adult learners seeking life-enriching experiences.

Program Assessments: During the previous 5 years we have used various assessments to address the call for more research about study abroad programs (Gillespie, 2002; Van Hoof & Verbeeten, 2005). For example, based on assessments from the 2004 – 2006 programs, we (Bradley, Reinking, Jorgensen, & Headley, under review) found that after participating in this study abroad, pre-service teachers demonstrated (a) an increased depth of understanding about diversity, teaching, and literacy instruction; (b) an empathetic stance and greater sense of responsibility toward culturally and linguistically students, and (c) an increased understanding of the role of self-reflection in the process of becoming an effective teacher. Currently we are analyzing data from the 2008 program, to compare the beliefs about diversity and teaching between pre-service teachers who have and who have not participated in a study abroad program. Further, we are investigating more precisely how pre-service teachers' beliefs about diversity and teaching change, and what aspect of the program influences those changes. We assessed the 2008 study abroad program based on the following assignments:

Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-Efficacy Scale (CRTSE; Siwatu, 2007) and the Survey for Regular Classroom Teachers of English Language Learners (RCT-ELL). Prior to and at the end of the program, participants completed the CRTSE, a tool used to measure teachers' beliefs in their ability to engage in instructional practices associated with culturally responsive teaching, and the RCT-ELL, which measures teachers' beliefs about instructional practices for English language learners. Our analysis, thus far, indicates that prior to departure, participants and non-participants in a study abroad program have similar beliefs. However, after participating in the study abroad, participants demonstrate a statistically significant difference on the CRTSE, which suggests that the study abroad program contributes to developing pre-service teachers' beliefs and dispositions that are needed to engage in culturally responsive teaching. However, there were no statistically significant differences for comparisons using the RCT-ELL.

Ethnographic Observations and Guided Written Reflections. Prior to departure, participants completed ethnographic observations (Frank, 1999) of daily activities (e.g. grocery shopping, dining at a restaurant). Then, in Italy, they completed parallel observations along with weekly ethnographic observations in their host classroom. Students also completed guided reflections each week about (a) activities with their host family, (b) teaching English to children, (c) learning the Italian language, and (d) participating in educational and cultural activities. We are in the process of completing our analysis of these data, but there is preliminary indication that students' views of family, school, language and culture change notably during the course of the program.

Additional Benefits: After participating in the program, students have reported that they have maintained a relationship with their host family. Further, some students have returned to Carpi to visit their host family, while others report that their Italian family has visited them in U.S. Thus, the effects of the program clearly extend beyond its time frame. Students have also indicated that they changed their student teaching request or sought employment in schools serving a high percentage of English language learners. Further, students report that the program stimulated them to obtain an endorsement as a Teacher of English to Speakers of Other Languages. Finally, because of our collaboration with the VLC and the schools in Carpi, Italian children and youth have participated in a summer camp in South Carolina for the past 2 years, while this past summer several pre-service teachers are stayed an additional 5 weeks to work as camp counselors in Carpi.