Beyond SIGHT SEEING

MAXIMIZING YOUR STUDENTS' INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

In his 2009 article in this magazine, Erik Gearhart made it clear that educators who set out to prepare students for a globalized world need to be intentional about their goals. Specifically, he asked, do we hope to develop "better competitors with requisite technical skills and knowledge to succeed on a 'flat' playing field? Better critics of unjust globalized forces, motivated and able to act to reduce inequity? Better collaborators, ready to work cooperatively with global partners on shared problems?"

The point of these probing questions is clear. To create excellent global travel programs, we need to know our aims.

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The good news is that schools can accomplish this clarity of purpose through well-developed and diverse global travel programs combined with a global curriculum that intellectually prepares students for those overseas experiences. Certainly, we want our graduates to succeed in their chosen professional fields — to be global competitors with requisite technical skills and knowledge. Yet for schools committed to global education, making students aware of global issues should also be a primary focus. In today’s world, we need to educate students to be critical thinkers who can collaborate with international partners to create both social and economic change, contribute to humanity, and develop a deep appreciation for the diversity of the world.

But what do well-developed global travel programs entail? A closer look at the collaborative benchmarking efforts of schools with established programs provides some answers.

**BENCHMARKING GLOBAL PROGRAMS**

In October 2008, the National Association of Independent Schools published “NAIS Global Schools: A Snapshot,” a survey report that measured the globalization of its member schools. Of the 1,371 respondents, more than 59 percent noted some form of global programming. The survey defined “global programming” as any of the following: participating in the NAIS Challenge 20/20 program; offering Mandarin studies; incorporating a global curriculum; or having established international programs that included sister schools, exchanges, partnerships, or student trips abroad.

Breaking down the data further, survey results indicated that only 376 schools (fewer than 30 percent) offered student trips abroad. However, the survey did not differentiate the types of trips, instead generalizing them as “service learning, language, study, or adventure.”

As helpful as the survey is, it also left many questions: How many students do we send abroad annually? Where do we take them, and why? What do we do while abroad? What do we do to prepare our students for their experiences overseas? How do these trips connect with the curriculum at home? How well are these programs funded and staffed and supported by our missions?

To answer these and other questions, five independent schools, in conjunction with NAIS, established the Global Education Benchmark Group (GEBG) in 2008 — with another 52 independent schools joining soon after. The goal of the group is to benchmark our international travel programs in order to understand and help improve the practices in all schools.

For too many schools, the normal travel model looks something like this: a language teacher decides that she would like to take a group of students to France and expose them to French language and culture. She contacts any number of travel partners that specialize in student trips. They give her the tour options and prices. She chooses a program that supplements her course and recruits a chaperone or two. A few months later, they are all visiting the Louvre and the Eiffel Tower and sampling French cuisine.

No doubt there’s some value in such trips, but the experiences of GEBG schools suggests that we can — and should — do better.

**WHERE WE GO**

The GEBG gathers data annually to track the progress of our varied programs over time. It also studies the data to understand the trends in global education. The accumulation of data over time will tell us a great deal about quality programs. But already we have some baseline information of value — about where schools send students, and why.

In 2011, the 57 GEBG schools sent more than 2,000 students abroad on an average of eight school-sponsored programs per school. We found that roughly 20 percent of students in GEBG schools travel abroad each year, or the equivalent of 91 students per school.

We also learned that an average of only 12 students participate in each individual travel experience. This latter point is crucial because the benefits per student increase as the group size decreases. In smaller groups, students will have less contact with their peers and more contact with the citizens of the nations into which they travel — thus magnifying their experiential education. However, we’ve discovered from informal surveys that many independent schools send 30 or more students abroad on specific trips (see description of Paris trip). Based on their years of experience, GEBG directors report that the chances of positive outcomes are inherently diminished in groups this large. The one clear exception would be performance groups (chorus, orchestra, dance, etc.) where numbers of participants tend to be higher to ensure quality performances.

Traditionally, school travel programs have set their sights on Europe. But the GEBG has found that the trend in student travel is clearly heading in the direction of visiting developing countries.

In 2011, GEBG schools sent 30 percent of their students to Europe (down from 41 percent in 2010), with a heavy emphasis on France, Italy, and Germany. At the same time, 35 percent traveled to Asia, up from 19 percent the year before. China and India were the top destinations, with
Japan coming in a close third. Central America received 15 percent of the GEBG students, with Costa Rica as the top destination. Seemingly mirroring its status in international relations, Africa received only 6 percent of GEBG students. While Africa provides some of the most diverse cultures and experiences to travelers, the airfare to the continent is steep, which may pose a significant barrier. Additionally, there are disproportionately fewer mainstream travel companies that offer African travel experiences.

WHAT WE DO

"Travel," according to author Miriam Beard, "is more than seeing the sights; it is a change that goes on deep and permanent in the living." The path to achieve this deep and permanent change of character varies by school. Some focus on international service-learning programs, while others offer language immersion programs or academically focused travel opportunities.

A prime example of an innovative approach to academically focused global programming is Cape Henry can nation, offers an academically focused program on Tanzania that embeds a travel experience at the end of the course. The students study the Serengeti ecosystem and wildlife conservation, and then travel through the highlands of the Ngorongoro region to the Serengeti National Park, camping and working in an area rich in wildlife — including lions, leopards, elephants, and wildebeests. In addition to fieldwork, the students also help improve the facilities in one of the local schools.

GEBG schools continue perfecting language-immersion trips with great success — evident in the number of graduates with a high level of language proficiency, often in more than one world language. Lise DeConingh, chair of the upper school world language department at Hathaway Brown School (Ohio), has developed partnerships with schools in France and Spain that allow her students the opportunity to immerse themselves in their language of study. In addition, weekly pre-trip videoconferencing meetings with students at the host schools continue improving language skills and develop cultural awareness.

Global Service Learning (GSL) programs that combine academic study, cultural immersion, and community service are increasingly popular. Currently, almost 40 percent of GEBG schools offer service-learning programs. Lakeside School (Washington) has created one of the top GSL programs, with a unique partnership with Peru that includes home stays, projects with local partners, and curriculum elements before, during, and after the trips.

According to Vicki Weeks of Global Weeks, GSL programs help provide necessary skills for global citizenship, including critical thinking, teamwork, communication, and problem solving. The result of this comprehensive approach to global travel is a globally informed student who collaborates with international partners to make a difference in the lives of others. The service-learning model may be evolving into sustainable service programs.
Establishing Best Practices

The GEBG aims to establish a core list of best practices for global travel programs. Preliminary research indicates that an effective to-do list for schools should include the following:

Create a Mission Statement
In order to ensure a great program year to year, a school needs to develop a clear mission statement about the purpose and scope of its program. Seventy percent of GEBG schools include the word “global” in their mission statements.

Hire a Global Program Director
Among the GEBG schools, 40 percent have full-time directors and 60 have part-time directors. It’s obviously a question of money for schools, but schools with global travel programs find that things run more smoothly with a dedicated director.

Establish a Renewable Budget
Along with a director, an established budget ensures a quality program from year to year and allows a school to plan well. In addition to a budget, GEBG schools make a commitment to financial aid for student travel. In fact, financial aid has increased from 14 to 28 percent in the 2008-2012 time period. The goal is to make sure the financial aid opportunities for global travel mirror the school’s overall financial aid program.

Develop Risk-Management Policies and Procedures
All travel comes with risk. Knowing that things may go wrong should not deter schools from offering travel programs, but it’s important to engage in careful risk analysis and establish policies on issues that include chaperone training, insurance agreements, emergency planning, and protocol. As always, schools need to seek out good legal counsel and aim for the highest level of professional conduct.

Create a Code of Conduct
Students and parents need to understand what is expected on every trip. A student code of conduct that spells out the penalty for poor behavior, signed by both parent and student, will help guide decisions when problems arise.

in which students visit a country and bring with them a knowledge that they pass on to their hosts, thereby continuing the benefits of the visit long after the students leave.

About 11 percent of GEBG schools expand their globalization efforts through sister-school exchanges. Millie Cox, retired director of international studies at Charlotte Country Day School (North Carolina), created one of the premier exchanges of this kind. Charlotte Country Day boasts eight different sister schools in Chile, China, Canada, Mexico, Germany, France, Costa Rica, and England. Overseas home-stay opportunities give students a close, personal connection with their host countries, while students visiting the U.S. internationalize both homes and campus during their stays. Cox states that some of the benefits of a sister school exchange program are to “deepen the understanding of another culture, practice a foreign language, and make lifelong contacts and friendships.”

While global education programs fall into distinct categories, details of the programs are as diverse as their creators. For example, focusing on making stronger competitors in the “flat” world, Walt Swanson, director of the Center for Entrepreneurial & Global Studies at Wilbraham and Monson Academy (Massachusetts), adds an academic component to his exchange program by exposing his students to an entrepreneurship symposium with Dutch students, professors of economics, and CEOs of Dutch companies.

Providence Day School (North Carolina) offers five distinct exchange programs and five academically focused trips — as well as a Global Studies Diploma Program, a rare find in a secondary school. The only similar programs that we uncovered are the Global Scholars programs at Hathaway Brown (Ohio) and Cape Henry Collegiate School (Virginia). “The Global Studies Diploma,” explains Lauren Faucher, director of global studies at Providence Day School, “allows students in grades 9–12 to choose a curriculum and a set