

LOGISTICAL ISSUES IN SETTING UP AN INTERNATIONAL MBA TRIP

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ABSTRACT

An International Educational Experience has become almost standard in highly respected MBA programs. As business has become global, students need to be aware of the differences in foreign cultures. These differences not only include how business decisions are made, but also how cultural norms affect personal interactions. When MBA students actually take an extended trip to a foreign country, they can experience first-hand many of these aspects.

Setting up a trip to a foreign country can be very difficult. First there are the logistical issues of travel (both to and from the location and within the country) and lodging. Second, there is the issue of setting up a formal educational experience. Finally, there is the issue of having the students experience the interaction with the people (both business and non-business) such that they can get around in a different environment from that to which they are accustomed.

This paper will describe how one university just set up a new International MBA course in Rome, Italy. The paper will detail how the faculty members worked with Italian schools, companies and host agencies to ensure that the students would receive a complete experience that will allow them to appreciate foreign cultures and know that they will need to adjust to those cultures to be successful in a global business environment.

BACKGROUND

There are many aspects of an international trip that must be planned for the students in advance. These aspects include lodging, transportation, business contacts and the formal European education system. In addition, students must be prepared for different cultural norms that they will encounter and some of the cultural idiosyncrasies that they may experience.

Historically, Bellarmine has worked with a host agency in Europe to develop international trips to Paris and Madrid. Over time, the university continued to contract trips based on the original agenda, making only minor changes as suggested by the faculty members who accompanied the students on trips. However, in casual conversations with representatives of the host agency, it was discovered that changes could be made that would reduce cost while increasing the educational experience for the students. In 2012, the faculty members who accompanied the students to Madrid and Paris worked with the host agency to modify these trips and were able to significantly reduce the cost.

In 2011, the University decided to investigate the possibility of an MBA trip to Rome for 2013. As a Catholic oriented school, a trip to Rome would be consistent with the general mission of the university. Two faculty members traveled to Rome in the summer of 2012 to meet with the host agency representatives and explore possible activities (and the related cost) to determine if the MBA trip was financially feasible and would provide a good educational and cultural experience for the students.

The host agency representatives in Rome and Florence worked, via e-mail, with the faculty members to set up the preliminary trip. Because the host agency was the same one that contracted the Madrid and Paris trips, their employees were familiar with the goals expected for the MBA international experience and suggested certain activities that might be considered. The remainder of this paper presents the course objectives and expected learning outcomes of the international course. A description of the curriculum and co-curricular activities is also discussed.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

Bellarmino University requires an international experience to satisfy the curriculum requirements of the MBA program. Most students satisfy this requirement by taking a class trip to Europe. Some students are unable to go on the trip due to cost, family matters, employer conflicts and medical conditions. Those students must take the on-campus substitute course, although this option is somewhat inferior as it does not offer direct exposure to a different culture. Experiencing a different culture directly. Under either option, the principle course objective is to provide students with a transcultural experience that will increase their understanding of the role of the leader/manager in a global economy. While different students will have different experiences that may result in different outcomes, the university believes the following are the base outcomes to be expected:

- a. Students will be able to discuss the importance of doing business globally.
- b. Students will be able to describe the impact that differences in Political, Economic, Social, and Technical (PEST) environments have on doing business globally.
- c. Students will experience a non-U.S., non-English speaking culture.
- d. Students will experience bonding with MBA classmates outside of the class environment.

FACULTY EXPERIENCE

Lodging

Hotels vary in quality and price throughout Europe. The faculty required that the hotels would be clean, comfortable and convenient (via walking, metro, or bus) for the tourism section of the experience. Several hotels and in various locations were suggested. By visiting these hotels and speaking with the management. The faculty were satisfied that one of the 3 Star hotels suggested by the host agency would best meet these requirements..

Formal Classroom Educational Experience

The European classroom experience is considered to be a critical element of the MBA trip. Not only do the students get a different classroom style experience than they would experience in the states. They would also study business practices in Italy in the classroom, including the importance of family, culture, and history. The two faculty members were able to tour the school

and meet with its Director and some of the faculty members. In the meeting, agreements were reached concerning:

- a. Content (incorporates accounting, business, economics, financial concepts & culture in which business is done)
- b. Mechanism of delivery (lecture, discussion, case study)
- c. Classroom time (allocation of time, full day vs. alternatives)
- d. Complementarity with the out-of-classroom experiences in order to produce an integrated international experience.

Company Visits

Formal visits to company sites aid students in their understanding of European business practices. The goal is to have executives of these companies discuss employment issues in that country and how business practices (especially sales) are affected by cultural norms and how they differ from that experienced in the states. The faculty wanted at least two such trips and wanted the two to differ in nature of business function. Two such companies were selected. One was visited by the faculty members but the other was not.

1. Ferragamo

The faculty members met with Laura Buoncocore, corporate Events Manager. At this meeting discussions were held to inform the faculty members of

The company & its founder, Salvatore Ferragamo
The history & development of Ferragamo
The company's integration of history and culture into the business

After a tour of the company's showroom and museum, it was clear that Ferragamo focus highlights the connection between culture, history and Ferragamo. Ms. Buoncocore further assured us that Ferragamo could tailor its visit to meet whatever aspect of business and culture that might be desired

2. Castello Banfi Winery

The faculty were unable to visit the winery due to time constraints on the preliminary visit. In 2013, the visit to the winery would be held as part of an overnight trip to Florence. The faculty were assured that this was a popular tour of other academic institutions and that representatives of the winery would focus their discussions on the manufacturing process in the winery and their business practices in exporting wine.

Cultural Activities

Rome and Florence are replete with historic places, including many art and religious museums. One of the goals of the international trip is to expose students to as many of these as possible. Although it is impossible for the students to see everything in ten days, one of the goals of the exploratory trip was to visit as many places as possible and to a) determine which ones are most significant in the history of Europe and b) which places can best be visited by groups. Some places require standing in long lines as opposed to quick access when in a group setting. In some of these places, tour guides were available at reasonable prices and some were not. Those that

provided the most efficient combination were chosen for the 2013 trip and the some of the others will be recommended as 'best value' by the faculty.

Those places chosen by the faculty to go in a group and are harder to get into on an individual basis were:

In Rome

- a. The Vatican Museum and St. Peter's Basilicai
- b. The Coliseum
- c. The Roman Forum

In Florence

- a. The University (which houses the Statue of David)
- b. The Uffizi museum

Those places that will be recommend by the faculty and are relatively easy to visit on an individual basis.

In Rome

- a. The Pantheon
- b. Trevi Fountain
- c. Castle San Angelo
- d. Spanish Steps
- e. Any of the many beautiful churches all around Rome

In Florence

- a. Santa Croce
- b. The Medici Museum
- c. Il Duomo
- d. Pitti Palace

Students will be free to select other sights and museums based on their individual preferences. The faculty asks students to study tour guides prior to their visit and look for places that are of individual interest to them.

Transportation

Transportation issues pervade all other decisions. Issues that the faculty had to address were:

- a. transportation to and from the Rome Airport to the hotel
- b. transportation to and from the European university
- c. transportation to and from Florence, including the visit to the winery
- d. transportation to and From other cities in Italy during the free weekend
- d. convenience to get around Rome and Florence and visit the many historical sites.

The cost of transportation had to be weighed against convenience in all matters. In the large group, the general options were bus, train, or taxi. There were many examples that cost and efficiency were considered in the transportation issues. The following are two such examples.

1. The host agency was originally suggesting that it take over when the students reached the hotel. This would mean that each student would have to spend approximately \$ 60.00 round-trip per person (approximately \$ 2,400) and be at the mercy of the many taxicabs. By negotiating a bus for the round trip, the roundtrip cost was reduced to less than \$ 1,000.
2. The excursion to the winery had to be by bus since no train was available. To reduce total travel time on the bus, the visit was scheduled on the way to Florence for an overnight stay. However, returning to Rome from Florence the following afternoon did involve a choice between bus (3 hours ride) vs. train and taxi (about 1 ½ hours). Because there was a significant reduction in cost by taking the bus, that was the option the faculty chose.

Cultural Norms and other items

One of the most important benefits of having the faculty travel in advance is to learn the cultural norms of Italy and provide guidance to the students. In all cases, the faculty do not want their students to be thought of as 'ugly Americans' or to go to a main sight and not be allowed in due to improper dress. There were several things that the faculty found out. A sample list of items include.

- a. There are dress requirements at the European University and by the companies being visited
- b. Eating in public places (such as by the Trevi Fountain and in front of the Pantheon) is illegal and the police will issue fines
- c. Shoulders and knees must be covered to be admitted to many churches (St. Peter's in Rome, Santa Croce in Florence)
- d. Pickpocketing is an art in Italy and there is little that the police can or will do
- e. Hotels require a modicum of decorum or a student may be evicted
- f. If pictures are taken in places where doing so is prohibited, the camera or cell phone will be confiscated
- g. The bus ride to the winery travels a winding route through the mountains and those that are subject to motion sickness need to prepare in advance

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The international European trip is a valuable part on any MBA program since many students will either work with business counterparts in Europe or may someday hope to work in a European country. An understanding of the differences in business practice and the effects of those cultural norms on business practices is essential for success..

Although there are excellent agencies in Europe that will provide assistance in planning and execution of the trip, a pre-trip visit by the MBA faculty to meet with the agency, the European university and the business is necessary to ensure that the trip is designed to meet the goals of the course. In addition, the faculty can explore the various cost and benefits of the options offered by the European agency and experience, in advance of the class trip, the effects of cultural differences on the students. .