Development and Implementation of a Semester Program in Mexico for Senior Nursing Students

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The College of Nursing (CON), Michigan State University (MSU), in collaboration with the School of Nursing and Obstetrics, University of Guanajuato, Celaya, Mexico, developed a semester-long study-abroad program for senior MSU nursing students offered for the first time in the fall of 1998. The program provides intensive Spanish language classes and allows students to take required nursing courses in Mexico with a substantial amount of course content provided by Mexican faculty without an MSU CON faculty member on site at all times. Students receive a broad perspective of nursing and health care in Mexico, and develop an appreciation for its language and culture as well. This program represents an innovative approach to the development and implementation of a study-abroad program in nursing. (Index words: International, Nursing, Education, Baccalaureate) J Prof Nurs 16:293-299, 2000. Copyright © 2000 by W.B. Saunders Company

Recognizing the benefits of acquiring skills that will prepare students for the emerging global community and the challenges of living and working in the 21st century, Michigan State University (MSU) has set a goal that by the year 2006, 40 per cent of baccalaureate graduates will have had a study-abroad experience at a cost comparable with on-campus study. MSU has offered study-abroad programs for more than 30 years, and is actively expanding its international efforts. It currently has more than 95 programs in over 40 countries on 6 continents to accommodate the needs and interests of the growing number of students seeking this opportunity.

The MSU College of Nursing (CON) has a similar long history of offering programs abroad. For the last 19 consecutive years it has offered Nursing in London, a 4-week, 5-credit elective course during the summer. The program is open to undergraduate and graduate nursing students, and graduate nurses from across the country. This is an MSU faculty-led learning experience that provides insight into the history and socioeconomic political context of nursing education and practice in England, as well as an opportunity to compare these with nursing in the United States.

Building on the London program experience, and consistent with MSU goals for study abroad, the CON, in collaboration with the University of Guanajuato School of Nursing and Obstetrics in Celaya, Mexico, developed a full-semester (12-credit) program for senior-level nursing students that was offered for the first time in the summer and fall of 1998. This program is unique in relation to other study-abroad programs in nursing in that it is a semester long, offers nursing courses required for graduation, and is without an MSU CON faculty member on site at all times. Students are immersed in the culture, live with families, and participate in learning experiences with Mexican nursing faculty and their student counterparts while learning about the Mexican health care system.

Background

Currently, approximately 90,000 college and university students in the United States receive academic credit for study abroad each year. The majority are white (84 per cent); women (approximately 66 per cent); juniors (about 50 per cent); major in the humanities and social sciences (35 per cent), business (14 per cent), and languages (11 per cent); study in Europe (approximately 66 per cent); and almost half
study abroad for less than a full semester (Hoffa, 1998).

Few nursing programs, however, offer study-abroad opportunities. Lindquist (1986) surveyed 403 baccalaureate schools of nursing to determine ways in which nursing curricula were internationalized. Of the 319 that responded, only 14 per cent had study-abroad programs, ranging in length from 1 week to 1 academic year, with the majority 1-month long. Fifty-three study-abroad programs were identified, and, of those, 58 per cent were offered during the summer or interim periods (between semesters, on breaks). No comprehensive study has been published since Lindquist's in 1986, however, a few articles on study-abroad programs in nursing have been reported in the literature. Of the programs reported, the majority continue to be short term or are offered during the summer when students are often free to take courses outside of the required nursing curriculum (Bond & Jones, 1994; Colling & Wilson, 1998; Cummings, 1998; Stevens, 1998) or as an accelerated and concentrated experience (Ailinger & Carty, 1996).

Several characteristics of nursing education tend to make nursing curricula less flexible than those of other disciplines. These characteristics may prohibit many nursing students from studying abroad for long periods of time unless they extend the time to degree completion. They may also inhibit many nursing programs from initiating efforts to develop longer term study-abroad programs. For example, nursing students must take a number of required courses in a predetermined sequence. Clinical requirements must comply with the state board of nursing regulations, and to assure student success, course and clinical content must include material tested by the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX). Liability issues often limit efforts to offer direct patient care experiences as part of the program. These constraints make short-term or summer programs a more feasible option for nursing students who wish to study abroad and increase the likelihood that nursing programs will develop the shorter length programs for electives rather than required credit.

Students, however, benefit considerably more from longer-term than shorter-term study-abroad programs. Hoffa's (1998) (p. 33) interactions with campus advisors and returning students indicate that "the longer the program, the greater the intellectual and personal impact, in terms of academic benefit, cross-cultural understanding, career-preparation, and maturation." Zorn's (1996) (p. 108) study of the long-term impact of participating in study-abroad programs concluded that "alumni who participated in the longer programs reported greater long-term impact (in terms of intellectual development, expanded global perspective and personal development) than those in the shorter programs." Longer programs were considered to be 12 to 16 weeks in length, and shorter programs 3 to 4 weeks in length.

Typically, nursing programs include content related to health care and health beliefs in other cultures. However, an added benefit of long-term study-abroad programs is that they provide a "lived experience," enabling students to develop language skills and an appreciation of other cultures, values, and beliefs firsthand. Such programs enable the student to develop flexibility, adaptability, self-confidence, and other personal skills. In addition to enhancing a student's global outlook, intellectual development, and personal growth, study-abroad opportunities improve career prospects. As nurses increasingly work with colleagues and clients from other cultures, they will need to develop a more comprehensive understanding of various cultures, the meaning of health and illness, the existence of different health care systems, and the role of the nurse and other health professionals within those systems if they are to provide culturally competent care. Long-term study-abroad programs provide an opportunity for students to begin to personally integrate and develop an appreciation for different cultural perspectives that will ultimately benefit them and their clients wherever they may choose to practice.

**Early Planning Stages**

In early 1997, the international advisory committee of the CON recommended that a semester-long study-abroad program be developed for nursing students that would include required nursing courses and not extend the time to degree completion. Desired program characteristics included (1) the program be in a non-English speaking country to enable students to develop language skills; (2) a less-developed country is preferred to allow students to experience a more extreme contrast with life and work in the United States; (3) the costs of participating in a study-abroad program should not exceed the costs of on-campus study; and (4) the collaborating baccalaureate program in the foreign country should be similar in philosophy and content to the MSU nursing program.

Although a number of countries were considered for the initiative, for a variety of reasons the committee strongly recommended that a new partnership be established in Mexico. The North American Free
Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has stimulated research into the comparability of approval and accreditation of nursing education programs, licensure/registration of nurses, and standards of practice across the discipline of nursing in Canada, Mexico, and the United States (Trilateral Initiative for North American Nursing, 1996). A number of Mexican universities offer baccalaureate degrees in nursing, and the curricula are similar in structure and content to those in the United States. As boundaries become more permeable, demographic trends indicate that the percentage of Hispanics in the United States is expected to exceed the percentage of non-Hispanic blacks by 2005 (Katz, 1999). Consequently, the socioeconomic and health conditions of our closest southern neighbor will become an increasing concern. Future economic development will continue to proceed along the north-south axis. Ability to speak Spanish is important for health care providers, particularly in Michigan where the Hispanic population increased 20 per cent between 1990 and 1995. To meet emerging local, state, and national needs, it is important that we forge closer ties with our Mexican neighbors, and educate nurses who are culturally and linguistically competent to work with Hispanic populations.

Beyond the socioeconomic rationale, program cost and personal growth opportunities were considered as well. The challenges posed by living in a situation that contrasts sharply with what one is accustomed to provides an opportunity for greater personal growth than a situation that is similar. In their review of the literature on outcomes of international study, Balsan, Thompson (1998) found that few studies have compared and contrasted the outcomes of learning experiences in developed and developing countries. They quote Brueggemann as suggesting that learning outcomes may differ in very different environments, and that personal development occurs during periods of “discontinuity, displacement and disjunction” (p. 14). Living in Mexico with families for an extended period of time, learning a new language, and working in a health care environment that diverges greatly from what is familiar, would provide this type of challenge for nursing students and the faculty who are involved as well. It was anticipated that establishing a program in Mexico for students also would open doors to develop collaborative research and other relationships between nursing faculty at both institutions. Because Mexico is contiguous with the United States, program costs, particularly air fare for students and faculty, would be relatively less expensive than other, more distant, Latin-American countries.

Site Selection

Consultation with 2 internationally known nursing experts, Dr. Helen Grace and Dr. Esther Gallegos, led the CON to explore possible linkages with 4 nursing programs in Mexico. Dr. Helen Grace was then Special Assistant to the President of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and a nurse with considerable experience in health care in Latin America. Dr. Esther Gallegos is a faculty member at the Universidad de Nuevo Leon School of Nursing in Monterrey, Mexico, who at the time was working on her doctorate in nursing in the United States. Dr. Gallegos was also a member of the Federation Nacional de Asociaciones de Facultades y Escuelas de Enfermeria, (the National Federation of Nursing School Associations) in Mexico, and was a core participant in the assessment of North American Nursing under the Trilateral Initiative for North American Nursing. Dr. Grace and Dr. Gallegos have considerable knowledge and experience with both Mexican and United States health care systems and were instrumental in identifying potential schools with which to collaborate.

In June 1997, with financial support from the MSU Office of Study Abroad (OSA), site visits were made to 4 schools of nursing in Mexico in an effort to determine which baccalaureate program was most similar in philosophy and structure to the MSU College of Nursing. College administrators learned about the academic programs, toured University facilities, met with nursing administrators and faculty, and visited inpatient and community clinical learning sites. Based on the commonalities between nursing programs; support and resources for international students; interest expressed by the nursing schools, administrators, and faculty; locations; and opportunities for collaboration, an agreement was reached with the University of Guanajuato School of Nursing and Obstetrics in Celaya.

Program Planning

Once a collaborative relationship was established, program planning began in earnest with a target implementation date of summer/fall 1998. Planning involved CON and Celaya faculty responsible for the on-campus courses to be taught in Mexico, the CON Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, a CON faculty member identified to be the lead faculty for the nursing courses to be offered in Mexico and to coordinate the academic component of the program there, the CON Coordinator for International Programs responsible for logistics and overall coordina-
tion of the program, and the Academic Coordinator from the UG/Celaya School of Nursing and Obstetrics. In September 1997, the dean of the School of Nursing and Obstetrics at the University of Guanajuato in Celaya visited the MSU College of Nursing for 1 week to discuss the logistics and academic requirements of the proposed program. The UG/Celaya Academic Coordinator who also served as the clinical faculty for the acute care observational experiences, was a Visiting International Scholar with the MSU College of Nursing for 3 months from January to March 1998. She lived with an American family, took intensive English classes, and collaborated with the faculty in program planning.

First Program Offering

For the first offering, timing of the program was similar, but not identical, to a regular on-campus semester. Seven students completed a 1-month intensive Spanish language and culture course at the language center, University of Guanajuato in Guanajuato, during July 1998, and then moved to Celaya for a 3-month experience at the School of Nursing and Obstetrics from August through November 1998. In Celaya, students took 2 required MSU nursing courses, Issues in Professional Nursing and Senior Practicum in Nursing, and an elective course on the Mexican health care system. Issues in Professional Nursing is a 2-credit didactic course with an emphasis on current issues in nursing in the United States. Senior Practicum in Nursing is a 4-credit course that focuses on leadership and management concepts with an observational clinical component. A 2-credit elective course on the Mexican health care system was developed jointly by MSU and Celaya faculty and offered by Celaya nursing faculty.

Orientation of Students

Students attended a number of orientations, both while in the United States and once they arrived in Mexico. They attended a general orientation offered by the MSU OSA and program-specific orientations offered by the CON, all of which were intended to prepare students for the experience of living in a foreign country, learning and speaking a new language, and dealing with culture shock and differences in values. Also, before departure, students attended a clinical conference for the Senior practicum course to prepare them for the experience, elaborate on course expectations, and facilitate development of personal learning objectives. The students’ objectives were translated into Spanish for the clinical nursing faculty in Celaya, who used them in conjunction with the course objectives to plan student experiences in the acute care and community settings.

Once in Mexico, students received an orientation in both Guanajuato and Celaya to the cities, the transportation system, culture, safety, and other pertinent issues related to living in another country. During the first week in Celaya, students participated in an orientation to the Mexican health care system, a tertiary care facility in Leon, and the community and acute care settings in which they would be obtaining their clinical observational experiences.

Spanish Language Requirements

With only 1 year lead time, it was not possible to establish extensive Spanish language requirements and still be able to recruit a sufficient number of students to participate the first program. As a result, the first cohort had no Spanish language requirement, although 2 of the 7 students were conversationally fluent at the time of application, and by the time the program began, 3 had taken a semester of Spanish, and 2 had no Spanish language background. A language requirement is being phased in, with the second cohort required to have 1 semester of college-level Spanish or the equivalent before the program begins, and the third cohort 2 semesters. Although this by no means guarantees fluency, 3 semesters of Spanish provides a foundation on which to build language skills. Given the frequent inflexibility of course offerings and timing across disciplinary units, it remains to be seen if these extensive language requirements will restrict the number of students we are able to recruit in future years. Academic advisors are currently encouraging high school and prenursing students to take Spanish courses if they are considering participating in the Mexico program.

Rationale for Program Composition

Students were required to take a full semester load of 12 credits, 4 credits of Spanish and 8 credits of nursing. For the first 4 weeks of the program students attended the Centro de Idiomas, or Language Center, at the University of Guanajuato in Guanajuato. Students were placed in courses appropriate to their level of ability and received 3 hours each day, 5 days a week of Spanish grammar, vocabulary, medical terminology, and conversation. Living with families facilitated language learning. Students continued to take Spanish classes, although not for credit, once they
moved to Celaya to build on the intensive instruction they received in Guanajuato.

Nursing courses offered included 2 required courses, and an elective on the health care system in Mexico. The required courses were selected for a variety of reasons. The instructional models and content for these courses can be offered comparably at both the East Lansing and Mexico sites, and neither course requires students to provide direct patient care. To meet Michigan Board of Nursing standards, the college had to show that students would receive the same required course content in both locations. For this reason, both courses taught on campus were videotaped and mailed to students in Mexico. Additional lectures related to the role of the nurse, professional status of nursing, and current issues in nursing in Mexico are taught by Celaya nursing faculty as part of the issues course.

The clinical component of the senior practicum includes observational opportunities in inpatient and community-based agencies that provide health care services across the life span. MSU students spend 15 hours each week for 1 week shadowing a nurse in an administrative role and are paired with Mexican nursing students to facilitate learning. All clinical experiences take place in health care agencies that are part of the health care system of the Mexican government and are used by the school of nursing in Celaya for its student experiences.

In the acute care setting, students observed nurse leaders in pediatrics, medical/surgical, intensive therapy, and medicina preventiva (similar to a public health department and part of the government's Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social or IMSS system). Two Celaya clinical nursing faculty were identified to coordinate the observational experiences, 1 for the acute care setting and another for the community setting. These faculty were instrumental in ensuring that students were able to meet the course objectives. During regularly scheduled visits to Mexico, the lead MSU faculty member led course seminars for the senior practicum and held conferences with students to monitor their progress.

The 2-credit elective course on the Mexican health care system provides students with an understanding of the Mexican health care system and the role of the nurse and other providers in that system. This course, taught in Spanish by a Celaya faculty member with English translation, is critical to students' understanding of the health care context in which they will be studying and working. During the first year of the program, the course was taught in Spanish with an interpreter. However, by the third year, the course on the Mexican health care system will be taught in Spanish without an interpreter.

**MSU Faculty Site Visits**

The lead MSU faculty member made 4 trips to Mexico during the program's 18 weeks, once each month for a 3- to 5-day visit. During each visit, the lead faculty member met with MSU students, Celaya course and clinical faculty, monitored students' progress with their course objectives and personal learning objectives, provided seminars, and addressed any personal problems of the students. During the final visit, she met with Celaya course and clinical faculty to evaluate students' performance, hold final clinical conferences, attend students' final presentations, and take part in the end-of-program celebration. When the MSU faculty member was not in Mexico, students were able to contact her and other MSU faculty by e-mail, an 800 number to the CON, and by a cellular phone the lead faculty carried with her at all times.

**Program Institutional Support**

MSU has a well-developed infrastructure to support study abroad. The MSU OSA provides support for the planning, development, and implementation of study-abroad programs for all on-campus units. This includes assistance with budgeting for individual programs, publicity, recruitment, programming, administration, advising, orientation sessions, and program evaluation. Some funding is also provided for the development of new programs, and scholarships are available for students. Mandatory supplemental health and evacuation insurance are required for all MSU study-abroad programs and are included in program fees. This insurance coverage provides assistance in locating health care providers while students are participating in study-abroad programs, and in emergent situations maintains constant contact with the student and his or her in-country health care provider to ensure appropriate care, and, if necessary, medical evacuation. Within the CON, the coordinator for international programs is responsible for planning and implementing study-abroad programs, and works cooperatively with the MSU OSA.

In addition to the administrator at Celaya who coordinates the academic aspects of the program and serves as the clinical faculty for the acute care agencies, a resident director who lives in Celaya and is fluent in English coordinates the logistics of the program on site. Her responsibilities include arranging transporta-
tion from the Leon airport to Guanajuato and from Guanajuato to Celaya, identifying home stay families, planning field trips, handling program finances, and serving as the on-site emergency contact person for the students.

**Evaluation and Recommendations for the Future**

In general, student evaluations of the first program in Mexico were extremely positive. Students completed a series of evaluations that addressed their perceptions of the overall program including nursing courses, faculty instruction, clinical preceptors, family home stays, the language component in Guanajuato, orientations, perceptions of the overall academic and cultural experience, coordination, and communication.

**Language**

Students were pleased with the Spanish language component in Guanajuato, but felt that in the future the course should be more intensive. As a result, students attending the second offering had 1 additional hour per day of Spanish class for a total of 4 hours per day, 5 days a week. All students confirmed that their language abilities improved tremendously, and recommended that future students have at least 2 semesters of college-level Spanish as a prerequisite to attending the program.

**Family Home Stays**

Family home stays were considered 1 of the most valuable parts of the students' experience, particularly in Celaya. While they lived with families in Guanajuato, generally, there were a number of other students staying in the home as well. In Celaya, all of the students were placed alone with a family. As a result, the students and their families became very close, to the point that the students were considered “daughters” and treated like members of the family. The close relationships that developed between the students and their families were in many ways the highlight of the experience for the students.

**Orientation**

Although students were provided with a general orientation to Mexican culture and what might be expected of them, we were not aware of some of the unique differences between the 2 communities of Guanajuato and Celaya. Students made us aware of these differences in their evaluations. In Guanajuato, students were not exposed to any curfew requirements, but in Celaya it was widely known and accepted that young women had a curfew of 2 am. Students quickly learned to adhere to the curfew, and we were sure to include this information in the orientation for students the following year.

Other issues were time orientation, culture shock, and the potential for illness. In much of Mexico, time orientation is different from the United States with less concern for punctuality. Culture shock and homesickness are common and experienced by all students to varying degrees. In her evaluation 1 student said, “the first couple of weeks I was very homesick. I was tired of speaking Spanish. I also felt confused and scared because I didn't think I'd adjust.” One student recommended to future students, “be very flexible—know things are going to change.” Another insightful student commented, “be patient . . . just because things are different doesn't make them wrong. Try not to let your biases ruin your experience.” This and other information offered by the first group of students was provided to the second group in their orientation before departure, and was reinforced at their orientation in Celaya. Students also need to be aware of the possibility that they may suffer some gastrointestinal problems during the first week or two in Mexico, as they adjust to a different dietary intake.

**Appreciation for the Profession**

One unanticipated outcome of the program was the strong appreciation students developed for nursing as a profession, and for the importance of professional nursing organizations, which was fostered by the Celaya nursing faculty. One student commented, “I enjoyed my experience in Mexico. I received valuable information which I will use to improve my nursing practice once I become an RN. I’ve also realized the importance of participating in professional organizations to promote the advancement of nurses. Studying in Mexico has given me a greater respect for nursing globally.”

**Resident Director**

Students were very pleased with the personal and professional assistance provided by the resident director in Celaya. She, along with the nursing school administrator in Mexico, was critical to ensuring that the program ran smoothly and that any personal or
other problems experienced by the students were communicated to the MSU CON.

Course, clinical, and faculty evaluations were comparable with what would be expected on campus, and students were very pleased with both acute and community experiences. Celaya faculty were highly rated, nurses in the clinical settings were extremely helpful, and the acute care and community experiences proved to be eye-opening in many ways.

Nursing and Health Care in Mexico was offered from August 16-December 11, 1999 to 7 senior MSU nursing students, and will be offered again, August 12-December 9, 2000. The program dates coincide more with the MSU academic calendar to enable students to take summer courses and work to earn money for their travel. The content and format of the courses will remain the same, and efforts have been made to connect the schools of nursing in Celaya and at MSU via computer-based desktop video conferencing. Faculty are exploring collaborative research opportunities as well.

This program represents an innovative approach to the development and implementation of a semester-long study-abroad program in nursing. The program includes required nursing courses without an MSU CON faculty member on site at all times, and provides an opportunity for students to develop Spanish language skills and an appreciation for the Mexican culture. The CON at MSU has been privileged to establish close collaborative relationships with the University of Guanajuato/Celaya School of Nursing and Obstetrics faculty and students. The opportunity to learn about and experience nursing and health care in another country and culture has been invaluable, as are the personal relationships that have been established with Mexican families, friends, and colleagues.

References


