Pura Vida: Using Study Abroad to Engage Undergraduate Students in Comparative Politics Research

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Political science undergraduate students often have a difficult time understanding the processes and methods of social science research. The foci of courses in comparative politics such as Latin American Politics or European Politics are typically descriptive information, concepts and theories, and an overview of the principal debates and research findings. This stands in sharp contrast to undergraduate pedagogy in the natural sciences, where laboratory sections supplement classroom activities. For example, biology students learn the basics of the discipline in the classroom, and simultaneously use the tools and methods of scientists in the lab to replicate elementary experiments. This multi-method approach not only reinforces the students' understanding of biological concepts, but also gives them an appreciation for how their professors spend their time and the challenges, pleasures, and limitations of academic research.

Study abroad provides a magnificent opportunity for students to learn about other cultures, political and social systems, as well as the intersection of international and domestic politics. We believe that study abroad also facilitates pedagogical advantages for comparative politics courses, where students can be immersed in Kolb's "Experiential Learning Model." Kolb's learning model helps students "become effective thinkers and problem solvers" (Brock and Cameron 1999, 3). The model's four stages, concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation, coalesce in a method that strives to engage each student's different learning type. In this paper, we describe experiential learning through undergraduate fieldwork and research activities that were part of a study abroad program in Costa Rica and report findings from student generated research.

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The Growing Importance of Study Abroad and Suggestions for Establishing Successful Programs

The number of U.S. university students participating in study abroad has more than doubled in recent years, reaching 160,920 for the 2001–2002 academic year. The fastest growing segment of international study is the short-term program lasting less than a semester. Since 1985, the number of students spending a summer or mini-terms in January in an international program has grown by 463%, to more than 82,000 (Arenson 2003).

These short programs can provide many of the benefits of study abroad and democratize the study abroad experience. In addition, summer programs more easily integrate full-time on-campus faculty as study abroad directors. The potential weakness of short programs is that they can exacerbate two traditional shortcomings of the study abroad experience: students may have little interaction with local families and students create a virtual campus "bubble," spending all of their free time together (Engle 1995).

The Sam Nunn School of International Affairs and the Georgia Institute of Technology have identified study abroad as an integral part of undergraduate education. The Institute has established the notable goal that 50% of all students participate in one significant overseas educational experience before graduation. As part of the menu of international education options, study abroad programs have flourished at Georgia Tech. The Nunn School organizes and administers overseas summer programs in Brussels, China, Argentina/Brazil, Costa Rica, and Cuba. Georgia Tech's are largely summer programs organized and directed by Georgia Tech faculty. Georgia Tech's programs provide the model for all Nunn School programs.

Having established three programs from scratch (Argentina/Brazil, Costa Rica, and Cuba), we have some suggestions for faculty and departments interested in incorporating study abroad into their menu of student activities.

There is money for study abroad. Seek it out.

University officials know that American students have a widespread deficit in global competence. More importantly, they know that the best job opportunities for their alumni over the long haul will go to those with tangible international experience and skills. Many universities have responded by offering substantial incentives to student and faculty to participate in study abroad. At Georgia Tech, for example, non-resident students pay in-state tuition for study abroad and all students are exempt from fees. In addition, there are a number of scholarships available. At Georgia Tech, President's Scholars (the most prestigious scholarship) receive study abroad grants.

Study abroad is also an endeavor that corporate America is willing to support. Somehow, the private sector is more receptive to funding college students gaining global competence than in funding research on the correlates of democracy in Central America. The Nunn School obtained substantial support from the Coca-Cola Foundation for its range of summer overseas programs. This support allows the programs to be affordable while still offering first-rate enrichment experiences that otherwise would be cost-prohibitive. In Costa Rica, the "Coke money" funded stays at the Smithsonian-built Arenal Observatory Lodge on the slope of the active Arenal

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Volcano, as well as a five-night stay at the La Selva Biological Station.

The amount of money available to support study abroad could grow exponentially. The Strategic Task Force on Education Abroad, co-chaired by former Secretary of Education Richard Riley and former Senator Paul Simon, recently urged Congress to provide $3.5 billion a year to fund fellowships for a half-million study abroad students annually (Fredrix 2003).

Incorporate strong cultural interchange in the programs.[1]

Even in a six or eight-week social science or natural science program, students can experience and absorb important cultural literacy. House students with local families or local students. Encourage students to purchase local products, adopt local customs, try local dance, and spend free time in small groups or with locals.

There is help out there for the administrative burden.

One of the biggest fears of potential study abroad directors is the administrative and time burden. Study abroad directors must recruit students, produce and submit numerous forms, recruit other participating faculty, design the program, establish relationships with in-country universities, make set-up trips, answer hundreds of emails from interested students and worried parents, handle large sums of money, provide an accounting of expenses, act as a travel agent, etc. etc. etc. If one is not careful, administering a single summer study abroad program can consume a faculty member. Fortunately, there are mechanisms for reducing, while not eliminating, this burden.

The first place to seek assistance is your department chair. Political science and international affairs departments talk the talk when it comes to the global competence of their students, make sure that they also walk the walk. The Nunn School supports study abroad directors by giving a one-course teaching reduction and by providing staff support. In addition, graduate student assistants can handle much of the administrative details and are a good source for fresh ideas about recruiting and program design.

The study abroad office at your university is a good second source for administrative and recruiting assistance. The study abroad director will likely be eager to walk you through the process of establishing a program and share a gamut of existing campus models. Shower your study abroad office with kindness and gratitude, and they will reciprocate with assistance in filling out forms, producing flyers, recruiting, and designing the program. In addition, the office of international education at the host-university can be very helpful. Particularly in popular destinations such as Costa Rica and Spain, these offices have years of experience and can be relied on to find housing, classrooms, transportation companies, etc.

Professors who already direct programs offer a final source of assistance, particularly if any are in your department. When we started establishing programs in Latin America, the Nunn School already had successful model programs in Belgium and in China. The program directors eagerly shared budgets, templates for applications, and strategies for recruitment.

Use study abroad to further research projects.

The single greatest burden for study abroad directors is the loss of summer research time. Political scientists can ameliorate this challenge by incorporating fieldwork into the study abroad experience. Think of the study abroad participants not only as students, but also as research assistants. In a few days, 25 students can administer as many surveys as a doctoral student can in several months. We describe one of these efforts in the next section of this paper.

Another research strategy is to piggyback fieldwork onto study abroad. One can often quite easily find small grants to spend an additional month or two in-county, as the airfare is already covered by the study abroad. After the students go home, the faculty can conduct interviews, research in libraries and archives, collaborate with in-county colleagues, present works-in-progress, etc.

A third strategy to transform study abroad participation from zero-sum to positive-sum for research faculty is to locate study abroad in countries that enhance your research program. A Spanish-speaking scholar of Latin America could enhance research by spending consecutive summers in a different sub-region or in Portuguese-speaking Brazil.

Study abroad is a labor of love, but directors deserve reasonable remuneration.

There is a considerable value to having faculty direct and accompany study abroad. Courses are rigorous and integrated with existing programs of study. While the rewards of directing study abroad go far beyond the financial compensation, faculty deserve and should demand to be properly compensated. In addition to a competitive salary, study abroad should pay for housing, airfare, and a per diem.

Demand high standards of conduct from students.

A common complaint from study abroad directors is that the students do not take the program serious enough, party too much, and cause major disruptions. We have found that the vast majority of study abroad participants want a focused and rigorous program. Two simple program features will greatly reduce troublesome students. First, let the students know at all times during the recruitment process that the program is demanding, that it is not an automatic A, and that faculty are not chaperones, but college professors. Make participation a significant part of the final grade, and have any disruptions or behavioral issues directly affect the participation grade. Second, maintain zero tolerance for student disruptions that affect the program.

The Costa Rica Study Abroad Program

The Costa Rica Study Abroad began as a six-week program in 2000. The program is explicitly interdisciplinary, featuring one course on tropical ecology taught by Georgia Tech biologist Terry Snell, and one course on environmental politics taught by political scientist Kirk Bowman. All program planning as well as course activities and content are jointly planned in order to emphasize the interdependence of natural science (tropical ecology) and social science (environmental politics and policies). The course activities not only include lecture and discussion at the University of Costa Rica, but also the range of site visits, guest lectures and demonstrations, tours, and interchange that are the hallmarks of study abroad.

During the first iteration of the program in 2000, the two faculty observed one important advantage in the biology curriculum. While the course had traditional lectures on ecosystems, classes of animals, etc., as well as beneficial site visits to a range of places such as the National Biodiversity Institute (INBio), the emphasis was on undergraduate student research. During the six weeks, the

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program had extended stays in five distinct ecosystems; the Pacific Coast, the Caribbean coral reef, the cloud forest (at the San Ramón Biological Station), the lowland rain forest (at La Selva Biological Station), and volcanoes (Arenal and Irazú). At Irazú, the students worked in groups to conduct a series of transects and measure plant species diversity. And at the La Selva and San Ramón biological stations, undergraduate student groups developed behavioral hypotheses, conducted biological fieldwork and experiments, and presented oral and visual presentations of their findings. The four to five member groups had four days to develop a hypothesis (for example, the calls of birds at the top of the canopy will be of a different tone than birds of the same species at the bottom of the canopy); get approval for a research design; conduct background research in the biology station library; consult with other on-site researchers; collect and analyze data; organize results; write a report; produce a PowerPoint presentation; and present the project in public. These group research projects not only reinforced content from the classroom and from written materials, but also provided a series of additional pedagogical benefits:

- experience with teamwork
- expertise in the specialized topic of tropical ecology
- understanding of scientific research, including the importance of asking good questions and the role of hypothesis testing
- experience with field research tools such as microscopes, night-vision binoculars, microscopes, nets, etc.
- appreciation for the difficulties and rewards of behavioral biology and fieldwork (it rains a lot in the rain forest, watching leaf-cutter ants for 10 hours to count the number of hitchhikers is only exciting for the first few minutes)
- respect and in cases awe for the biologists (such as those that the students interact with at La Selva) who spend years studying orchids, poison dart frogs, or beetles

While the Environmental Politics course was a major success, the absence of an equivalent research experience for the students was a difference with distinction. For the second iteration of the program in summer 2002, and in accordance with Georgia Tech's increased emphasis on undergraduate research, the study abroad directors/faculty decided to develop a meaningful fieldwork and research component for the Environmental Politics course.

The 2002 Undergraduate Research Project

Twenty-five undergraduates from a variety of majors participated in the 2002 Costa Rica Study Abroad Program. The faculty decided in advance that the social science research question would deal with the causes of environmental values and attitudes. Costa Rica is an excellent laboratory for studying environmental post-materialist value-shifts. Due to its location on the land-bridge between North and South America, tropical climate, volcanic activity, and two mountain ranges, Costa Rica's 13 distinct ecosystems contain a disproportionately high percentage of the world's biodiversity. On the social and political side, Costa Rica demilitarized in 1948–1949 (Bowman 2002), has been a full democracy since 1958 (Bowman, Lehoucq, and Mahoney forthcoming), and achieves impressive scores for basic social indicators and human rights. The country exploits its biodiversity, political stability, and human capital through ecotourism. Unfortunately, given the diesel smoke billowing from the country's vehicles and the ubiquitous litter strewn along highways, rivers, and walkways, it appears that visiting ecotourists often have a stronger commitment to Costa Rica's natural beauty than do some Costa Ricans (nicknamed *Ticos*). After a decade-long campaign by NGOs, tourism industry actors, educators, and the government to change Ticos' attitudes and behavior, one finds a wide range of attitudes towards the environment. It is a country undergoing a palpable shift from materialist to post-materialist values. The faculty wanted the students to engage these attitudes in their research project.

We designed the environmental politics course to measure and understand the causal processes accompanying this shift. To gain sufficient background, the students read Sterling Evans' *The Green Republic: A Conservation History of Costa Rica*, the local English-language newspaper the *Tico Times,*[2] and a course pack with readings dealing with topics such as the tragedy of the commons, the role of trans-national activist networks,[3] current issues in environmental education in Costa Rica, and the debates surrounding post-materialist value shifts.[4] Guest lectures from the faculty at the University of Costa Rica and NGOs such as The Nature Conservancy provided additional windows into the history and state of environmental values in Costa Rica.

The undergraduates were then charged with developing explanations for the wide variance in attitudes toward the environment. After a wide-ranging discussion, the students settled on the following potential explanations (causal variables) of "green" attitudes.

1. Women would be greener than men. Women are biologically and culturally (in the Costa Rican context) nurturing and men are more focused on materialist concerns.
2. Young people who grew up with constant messages about the environment would be greener than their elders who grew up when the dominant attitudes in Costa Rica were that forests were to be cut down as part of progress and development.
3. People who traveled abroad or spoke another language would be greener for two reasons: a) It could be an indicator of higher socioeconomic status, or b) it could be correlated to exposure to some attitudes in other countries (such as no littering) that are newly emerging in Costa Rica.
4. Biology students would be greener than economics students. The ideology of our field of study affects our worldview. The biology department at the University of Costa Rica is the genesis of environmental activism in the country and biology students study the flora and fauna that needs protection. In contrast, economics reinforces the view of individual material maximization, stressing materialist over post-materialist dynamics.[5]
5. Supporters of progressive political parties would be greener than supporters of conservative political parties.

Next, the students developed a survey instrument that would measure these independent variables as well as several elements of the dependent variable—"greenness." Course materials and lectures introduced some of the basics of survey research. Through their understanding of psychological surveying tendencies, students avoided using misleading questions and made sure to utilize a variety of question types such as open- and close-ended questions. They learned to use exhaustive and mutually exclusive options for

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multiple-choice questions, and to put all the demographic information at the end of the survey so as to avoid bias in the questionnaire. The survey was written in English, translated to Spanish, and vetted with several bilingual Costa
Ricans to best eliminate cultural and language biases from the instrument.

With an 18-question survey printed, the students were ready. They decided to collect 550 surveys at the University of Costa Rica (concentrating on biology and economics students) and an additional 550 surveys in downtown San José. The students did not have the time or resources to conduct a truly random survey of Costa Ricans or even of the Josefinos that live in the capital. We argue that a "random" survey of Costa Ricans in downtown is a reasonable surrogate. One can argue that nearly all of the residents of the San José metropolitan area regularly go downtown. The compact city center is the hub for all bus transit and home to a high concentration of businesses, services, and government offices. In order to increase the survey's randomness, students would invite every 7th adult that walked by to take the survey. The survey instrument was administered only in a written format; there was no oral component.

Before we discuss some initial findings, we would like to introduce some of the lessons that the students learned from constructing and administering the survey. These include:

- an understanding of the role of theory in developing potential causal explanations
- an appreciation of the difficulty in writing questions to measure indicators and attitudes
- an enhanced respect for the cultural factors that may bias a survey or study. Are people honest? Do they say what they think you want them to say? Are older people in a foreign country suspicious of young Americans administering surveys about their attitudes?
- a better grasp of concepts of reliability and validity.
- first-hand knowledge of the drudgery of research, as each student was required to administer at least 40 surveys and enter the data into 720 data cells.

Future Steps and Preliminary Results

The Georgia Institute of Technology actively encourages undergraduate research through the President's Undergraduate Research Awards (PURA). These awards pay undergraduates an hourly salary to work with faculty on research. One of the undergraduate participants of the 2002 Costa Rica Study Abroad Program, Ashley Jennings, received an award for spring 2003 to organize the data from the 1,100 surveys, create a scale of "greenness," conduct a literature review, help analyze the data, and co-author and submit both this article and an additional paper to a conference and a peer-reviewed journal. This work is in-process and now includes longitudinal data from a similar survey administered by another study abroad group in Costa Rica in the summer of 2004. Figure 1 previews some of the preliminary statistically significant findings for the causes of green attitudes in contemporary Costa Rica.

Figure 1
Statistically Significant Findings in Student Surveys in Costa Rica

1. Younger people are more supportive of fining people who litter than are older people.
2. Women are less likely to litter than men.
3. Biology students are less likely to litter than economics students.
4. Women, biology students, and younger people are willing to spend more money for cleaner emission buses than are men, economics students, and older people.
5. Biology students and younger people participate more in volunteer activities dealing with the environment (clean beaches, turtle egg protection programs, etc.) than economics students and older people.
6. Ticos held significantly greener attitudes in summer 2004 than in summer 2002, indicating a rapid adoption of environmentally friendly attitudes.

Conclusion

The study abroad experience not only educated students on issues of environmental politics, but also opened their eyes to the challenges of environmental protection in a developing country. Living in a country with some of the most diverse and unique ecosystems in the world, students could experience firsthand the biodiversity and environmental beauty that many Costa Ricans are organizing, educating, and volunteering to preserve. The Environmental Politics course challenged students to identify solutions to the traditional zero-sum game of economic development and environmental protection. One of the clear obstacles to environmental protection in Costa Rica is the traditional ideology of progress and development based on clearing the land and replacing rainforests with coffee fincas, banana plantations, cattle ranches, and urban development. Fortunately, a number of educational, cultural, transnational, and other forces are shifting Costa Rican attitudes away from environmental conquest to conservation. Constructing and administering a survey designed to measure and understand this ongoing culture shift helped a group of 25 students in 2002 (and another 24 students in 2004) to grasp this phenomenon and simultaneously gain an understanding and appreciation of social science research and the joys and challenges of fieldwork.Perhaps most importantly students (and faculty) gained a deeper understanding of the interdependence of our world. Ideas and attitudes travel, communities of activists are borderless, and choices made in Atlanta (such as the type of coffee or bananas we buy) affect Costa Ricans in the short term and all of us in the long term.

Notes

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1. For more on experiential learning and study abroad see Hopkins (1999).

2. The *Tico Times* is a weekly English-language newspaper with substantial coverage of local environmental politics and issues dealing with tourism, environmental NGOs, and biodiversity.

3. Much of these course materials come from Keck and Sikkink (1998).

4. This literature includes Abramson and Inglehart (1987) and Inglehart (2000).

5. This relationship and preliminary evidence for it from the university setting are found in Steiner (1990).

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APSA Annual Meeting Short Courses 2005

In addition to the panels and lectures given during the Annual Meeting, APSA designates the Wednesday prior to the start of the official meeting for workshops aimed to encourage greater professional development of its membership. Termed **Short Courses**, these half or full day sessions are a great opportunity for members to enhance their knowledge about a field and to reinvigorate their teaching and research skills.

Scheduling a Short Course

APSA Organized Sections and Related Groups, as well as non-APSA affiliated organizations and individuals, may propose a short course by completing the online application. Individuals proposing a course under Section sponsorship should be sure to discuss plans with the Section chair before initiating the application process. All applications should include the proposed short course name with a detailed description, sponsor, participants, expected attendance, and location, if it is held offsite. It is also helpful if estimated attendance and registration fee information is included at the time you submit the form.

Selecting a Topic & Securing Leaders

Course conveners are encouraged to develop courses that will not only draw members from their Section but also scholars from across subfields. Topics range widely and may involve new teaching techniques or research methodologies. Finding a topic linked to current trends in the discipline is one way to draw a large audience.

Organized Sections and related groups should begin the process of securing course leaders or participants early. This material will be published in the Preliminary Program along with other descriptive information. It is important for Sections who sponsor short courses to have a plan in place in the event of insufficient registrations or the need to substitute a course director or other presenter.

Although it is not required to do so, many organizers choose to charge a registration fee to cover expenses related to the course. This may include honorarium for course conveners, handouts or publications, audio visual equipment, or refreshments. The average cost for a full-day session is between $15-$20 for faculty and $5-10 for graduate students. Once a fee has been set the course organizer should select an individual to handle receipt of registrations, regardless of whether a registration fee has been set. This will allow the group to prepare for the number of participants and assist the APSA Annual Meeting staff in selecting a proper room size for the course.

Short Course conveners have access to a range of audio-visual equipment, ranging from overhead projectors to white boards and TV/VCR packages that are available at an additional charge to the course organizers. APSA provides the room, and podium and microphones at no charge.

Short courses are listed in APSA's preliminary and final programs, and full details are available on the Association's web site. Sections and related groups are encouraged to advertise their courses in newsletters, on web sites, and on electronic lists in advance of the meeting.

To ensure inclusion in the Preliminary Program, APSA must receive all grant application materials by March 18, 2005.

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