

**Association of Academia Programs in Latin America and the Caribbean
AAPLAC
14th International Conference**

February 20–22, 2003
San Antonio, Texas

Forum: AAPLAC and Accreditation.

**AAPLAC and Assessing the Academic Quality of
Education Abroad Programs**

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Is Accreditation Worth Pursuing?

In US higher education campus accreditation is standard and even traditional. The regional accreditation process arose to head off a mandated process, and over the last few decades federal funding linked it to the guarantees provided by the results of regional accreditation. Accreditation is now part of most every institution's survival strategy. We could question this history, its dependence on jargon based on the "talk" of education and planning. But we will leave that topic for another place. The question we face is this: How will the current expansion of accreditation demands impact international programs or study abroad? Now that accreditation has mounted the twin horses of strategic planning and outcomes assessment, the only uncertainty is who will carry-out accreditation. Just as higher education in the

United States of America developed a regional process to head off a national one, study abroad accreditation based on area studies seems closer to home and more welcome than the prospect of study broad accreditation by an all-country global process.

“American” higher education, when implemented outside the USA, has been treated differently than on home campuses. Sometimes the “overseas” programs are seen as a part of general campus accreditation, but for the most part field inspections do not take place. With more students spending one or two semesters, or some shorter period of academic time, studying in other countries, in a domestic climate of assessment and accountability, it is only a matter of time before more is demanded of study abroad programs. How do presidents know that the campus international education programs are reputable, even great? How do campuses assure home skeptics about quality? How can parents be sure that the program selected by or for their child is the best possible choice? How do students find the right program for their needs?

In the next decade, more than likely, these questions will be answered by international program (study abroad) accreditation based on accreditation standards. Who will set these standards? This forum is to consider using an association of international programs based on area studies – AAPLAC. Alternatives are the new *Forum on Education Abroad*, which brings a welcome emphasis on academic quality over administrative process. NAFSA is also very interested in the same process, through its specialized agencies.

The topic is this worth pursuing through AAPLAC, or is it better left to The Forum, NAFSA, or some other institutional process such as an add-on to existing accreditation.

AAPLAC members discussed a version of this topic in Oaxaca several years ago, when we first considered whether it is in the self-interest of our members to develop our own accreditation process, however rudimentary.

Accreditation in Brief

Students want to enroll in the program that best suits their needs – needs often unclear to them as they begin the search for a program. Some institutions pre-select programs or operate their own, and so the student may have a narrow choice and mostly around the country, but the student interest remains the same. **Parents** want safety and the best value. The **faculty members with vested interests in language or area studies** are most likely advocates and even involved in sending students to other countries. They want quality, but may lack the means to obtain the necessary resources. Standards would help them make their case. Then the **faculty members with skeptical outlooks** very much want to know about standards. **Administrators** may worry what staff and students really do when they are “there,” as “there” is outside

their experience. They may know international sounds right, but they may also think international is expensive and far away.

One purpose of accreditation is to provide these constituencies with an explanation of education in other countries and in other institutions of higher education which may differ. Private higher education in Latin America is a growth business, and full of surprises and grand sounding institutional names. Accreditation can assure the “American” public that standards exist. Accreditation can help those involved in study abroad by clarifying the professional agreed upon standards appropriate for the mission of each program.

Regional accrediting organization now uses the term “characteristic of excellence in higher education.” While they still ask about the easy quantifiable things like library size and percentage of the teaching faculty with different advanced degrees, their focus is more and more on institutional assessment of student learning based on measurable data. Student learning is what international education is seeks as well – but it is more complex as we mix academic courses with cultural and second language immersion.

Administration of an "accreditation" process would involve creation of an executive secretary mechanism. A study abroad program electing for an accreditation review would contact the executive secretary to initiate stage one of the process. The applying program would receive a self-study packet, which would guide the creation of a self-study. The completed self-study is then submitted to the executive secretary, and if found complete, stage two would begin. The executive secretary would assign a two-person team to visit both the home institution and the program in the field, with the purpose of writing their own report. The third stage is a review of the external report and a response by the study abroad program. A last stage involves an accreditation board that would review the completed self-study, the external review report, and the response in order to designating the program as meeting some minimum standards and thus accredited. Or their may be a call for program changes and re-review in a few years.

The Door to Standards Development is Program Differentiation

Program mission is the way we talk today about the reality of differing program objectives. This use of a typology is the only way to discuss standards and not create a threat to one or another program. Missions do vary. A typology allows for separating out questions which are appropriate to only one or another type of program. Initially it seems there seem to be six program types in Latin America:

1. Short-term guided travel or residence in one country.
2. Summer language immersion teaching Spanish or Portuguese.

3. Semester/AY language immersion programs teaching Spanish or Portuguese.
4. Semester/AY programs supporting direct enrollment in host university courses.
5. Semester/AY experience-based programs for credit without a university classroom component.
6. Semester/AY self-sufficient U.S. university programs located in a Latin American country.

More than likely this list needs to include combinations of the six types. Distinction might be made about the institutional context of programs as well based on sponsorship and solvency.

Phases of a Study Abroad Program

Standards regarding U.S. operated education abroad programs in Latin America and Caribbean countries might seem to fall into four phases:

1. **Country Context:** Review of country, city or rural region, and neighborhood in terms of security, and opportunities to match residence with academic goals.
2. **U.S. Education Abroad Program Quality:** Overall program quality including academic standards set by the sponsoring institution.
3. **Individual Student Well-Being:** Student safety and support standards in the specific Latin American or Caribbean country.
4. **Academic Content Quality:** Academic quality of course or experience in the specific Latin American or Caribbean country.

The location is education abroad is what makes the nature of the academic experience different from courses at a home campus. **Country context** involves assessment of security and overall health and safety issues, as well as cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic issues. Is the country and site in the country appropriate for education abroad and for a specific program with its particular objectives?

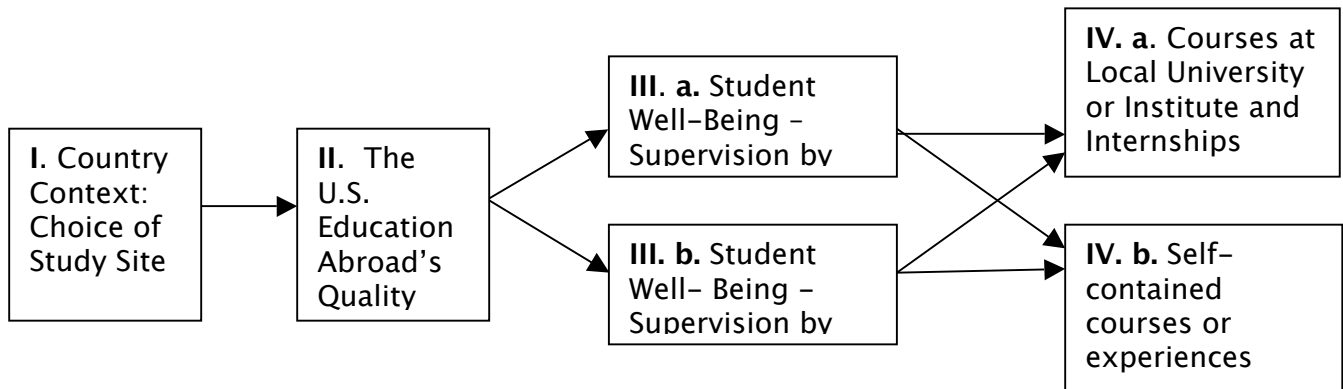
The category **U.S. Education Abroad Program Quality** combines program selectivity, the program's expectations for student learning, the nature of the academic supervision provided by the program, and the kinds of courses and internships made available.

Individual student well-being covers all non-academic aspects of the study abroad period from arrival through final departure from the host country. Involvement in marches and protests can become dangerous and may lead to arrest.

Academic Content Quality is a way of getting at the standards of the academic experience at the host university or study site. As much as this is critical for participating students and their parents, perceptions by higher

education faculty and administrators in U.S. is critical for program success. Education abroad programs need home university confidence in the courses offered by the program, or cooperating host universities or institutes. The level of confidence in the academic quality seems every year more of an issue, and it involves everything from the initial permission to attend programs to transferring back academic credit and meeting specific course requirements in a U.S. degree program. Academic standards for study abroad students may not necessarily be the same as for local students, but there must be confidence by the students' home advisor and department administrators in what is offered to their students. Parallel to this is the issue of academic quality and institutional accreditation systems within each country of Latin America and the Caribbean. With the appearance of new private universities all over Latin America, and extreme under financing of some traditional or public intuitions, certification of academic quality is on the public agenda in country after country in the region.

Each of these phases is relevant in different ways over time. There are many models of supervision of student well-being, which is here reduced to two, but there are, as we all know, many sub-categories. The chart attempts to illustrate these phases. In practice, most students start with a country choice, but that is perhaps beyond our scope. Next they either go with a program designated by their home university, or they shop for a program. It is in the comparison of programs that the following questions may be relevant.



The balance of this paper consists of questions aimed at generating information around these four phases. Each constitutes an area of standards assessment. These questions could be the start of a dialogue ending in an accreditation process. The intention for now is to provoke discussion over what is relevant for us to know about a program's quality. There is considerable literature on program evaluation from the point of institutions. Unclear still is

the weight that might be assigned to different questions on the list. In other words, what are the minimum standards an academic study abroad program must meet to be credible.

ASSESSING THE ACADEMIC QUALITY OF EDUCATION ABROAD PROGRAMS

I. Country Context

1. Is the country safe?
2. Is the site of the program safe? Interesting?
3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the site?

II. U.S. Education Abroad Program Quality

4. Institutional support: Does an accredited U.S. university sponsor the program? Is the program approved via a faculty governance process? If a private business, what are its credentials and ties to education?
5. If university connected, is administration of the study abroad program tied to a Latin American Studies department or program, or does an Office of International Education (OIE) operate it? If OIE, a follow-up question is whether the responsible administrator is a Latin Americanist, regional or country, specialist.
6. Is the program operated by a sponsoring institution having a single country, regional, or multi-continental focus?
7. How selective is the program in terms of admissions?
8. How successful is the program in seeking non-traditional study abroad participants?
9. What is the program's policy for "physically challenged" (*minusválidos*) students?
10. Is there an effort to assess the academic outcomes of students after return from their study abroad program in Latin America?
11. What are the academic and in-country supervision charges? Is the program non-profit or a business? If non-profit and a university, what percentage of the charges stay with the study abroad program versus going into a general fund? If a business, what percentage of the charges are spent in the host country on the program?
12. Does the program provide an accredited U.S. transcript at the semester's end? Is there an institutional commitment so that a transcript will be available in two years, five years, etc.?
13. Are the program directors in the U.S. close enough to the students to write letters of recommendation after the international experience? Is after-program support provided for graduate school, Fulbright and other applications?
14. What measures are taken so that the U.S. based administrators and advisors talking with applicants are up-to-date with host country details?

III.a. Individual Student Well-Being – Direct Supervision by U.S. Program Staff

15. Does the program have a legal presence in the country? Is it incorporated?
16. How many people work for the program in-country? What is the student per staff ratio?
17. Does the program have an office? Is it on a campus? Alternatively, is it at an independent location?
18. Regarding local non-U. S. citizen staff: Are they paid a middle class wage? Are they paid at the same level as resident U.S. passport staff? Are they paid health benefits? Are they paid retirement benefits? Does the program comply with all local labor and tax laws?
19. Regarding U.S. university staff in country: Do the U.S. faculty/staff stay in the country with appropriate visas? Does the program comply with all local labor and tax laws relating to foreign employees?
20. How does the in-country staff know of new students for the coming semester? Does the U.S. staff accompany the students for the initial period? Are files mailed, hand-carried, faxed, or transferred via Internet?

III.b. Individual Student Well-Being – Supervision by Local University or Institute Staff

21. Who runs the office? An academic? A non-academic staff administrator?
22. How senior is the staff in terms of university service? Can they solve problems with telephone calls?
23. How many people are in the office? What is the student per staff ratio?
24. Is the office administration full or part-time?
25. Does the “foreign student office” exist for cultural exchange reasons? Is it a source of university revenue? If both, which has priority?

III.a. & III.b. Individual Student Well-Being – Topics No Matter the Type of Supervision

Airport and Arrival Arrangements

26. Are students met at the airport?
27. If so, who is at the airport to meet the students?
28. Is there a back-up plan?

Orientation

29. Is orientation appropriate for the program?
30. How extensive is the orientation?
31. Is orientation pre- or post-departure? Or both?
32. Is orientation in English, Spanish, Portuguese or some combination?
33. Where is the orientation? Is it a retreat? Is it at the local university?
34. How long does orientation last? How is it structured?

Housing

35. What is the expectation of the housing? Room & board? Cultural? Language?
36. Who arranges housing?
37. What types of housing are available?
38. What are the average housing costs?
39. Are meals included?
40. Is a telephone required?
41. Is laundry covered?
42. If student does not like the housing, can a change be made? Will the program help?
43. Does someone on the program staff visit all housing sites?

Course Registration

44. Is the program primarily for advanced courses taught in a second language study? Alternatively, are immersion second language courses the core of the academic program?
45. How is local language proficiency assessed as a necessary step in course selection?
46. What is the registration process?
47. Is there any period of tentative registration for the student to settle his/her academic program for the term?
48. Who supervises the process?
49. Is there freedom to select courses?
50. Is there in-country U.S. program academic advising for the selection of courses?
51. If there in-country U.S. program advising, is it by U.S. students, administrators or teaching faculty?
52. Is there local university academic advising for the selection of courses?
53. If there is local university advising, is it by students, administrators or teaching faculty?
54. Are some courses not open to non-matriculated foreign students?
55. Are there a minimum/maximum number of courses/credits a student must take?

Health and Emergency Support

56. Who is available in case of emergency? Is there 24-hour English speaking support available?
57. Do parents have 24 hour English-speaking program contact in country and in U. S.?
58. Is health insurance required?
59. Are clinics and physicians readily available?
60. Does the program do emergency planning? In writing?

IV. Academic Content Quality - Host Institutions

61. How many students are enrolled, undergraduate and graduate?
62. What is pattern of the social and economic status of the local students?
63. How many foreign (study abroad and U.S.) students attend the university? As a percentage?
64. How selective is the university for local students?
65. What are its library holdings?
66. What is the condition of its research laboratories?
67. Are lab science courses taught?
68. What is its Internet status?
69. Do study abroad students attend courses with local students, or are there special courses for foreigners?
70. Is it an accredited university in the host country? (As many countries are just now developing accreditation, this has to be in a context of the country's institutionalality.)
71. How old is the university?
72. How many full-time faculty members teach there?
73. How many of the faculty members have Ph.D.s and Masters Degrees?
74. What percentage of first year students graduate?
75. What kind of university is the host institution:
 - a. Bachelors' degree U.S. type,
 - b. Bachelors' degree plus professional school,
 - c. Professional school organization.
 - d. Language institute