
Listserv Summary: Release Time for Study-Abroad Program Coordinating Faculty

November 14, 2016

An inquiry was made to the AIEA Listserv asking for insight into whether institutions offer accommodations or release time for faculty who wish to serve as university or college study abroad program coordinators rather than staff members.

Summary of responses:

There were 11 responses to this inquiry, which fall under the following categories:

- Release time is not recommended (2)
- A “blended system” is used (3)
- Release time is at the university’s case-by-case discretion (3)
- Part or full-time administrative coordinators are recommended over faculty (3)

Release time is not recommended:

1. While I appreciate the apparent attractions of the faculty-release model for directing the study abroad operation, I must speak against the approach as someone with extensive experience in the field who understands how important the professional context is in this field. There are numerous very complicated issues and concerns about which a study abroad director must remain well informed and, in my experience, faculty members serving in the role on release have a massive learning curve and sometimes are never fully able to integrate into the professional field of intercultural education (especially if they also remain faculty members and are trying to be even nominally research-active). Even when they do succeed, it takes them years to catch up with the current level of skills and knowledge of someone who has been working in the field.

Intercultural education is a highly specialized and professionalized field with its own graduate and professional degree programs, and there are people all over the country with substantial experience who are poised to step into director roles with a lot of knowledge and experience in tow. There are also many people, like me, who hold doctoral degrees in “academic” subjects but also have experience in the field (e.g., because we entered the field through a graduate assistantship, as I did). Thus, in my opinion, it is a mistake for an institution to rely on a faculty member with no prior professional experience in the field (either with a full or partial teaching release). It is equivalent to hiring someone who has only worked in study away programming to become a professor of anthropology. We may have some knowledge of how cultures function and even some professional training in ethnographic methodologies and theories, but unless we also hold a doctoral degree and teaching and research experience in academic anthropology, we are not the most qualified people for the job. The same is true in reverse.

2. We have wrestled with this as well on our campus. While we are still considering the development of a formal policy that would be administered through our accommodation office, many faculty members and departments allow extended time for international students that request and can demonstrate need. However, it is currently determined at the departmental and instructor discretion.

A “blended system” is used:

1. We have a dedicated group of professionals working on internationalization; therefore we do not have faculty coordinating units such as Education Abroad. We had that in the past, and when we did, we provided release time. At the College/School level, we do have a few faculty members who act as the college’s liaison/coordinator for international programs, and they get release time too. However, at the ‘central’ international office’s level, we do not. I can highlight two issues commonly associated with given those roles to faculty: (1) usually, faculty don’t stay in these roles long enough to guide structural changes and other long-term projects, and (2) faculty tend to eschew interest and participation of faculty and students from their major/department in the activities they coordinate even when that is not intentional.
2. All of the Study Abroad Center members are faculty - Director + 3 advisors. Our tenure is in Academic Affairs...is different in its set up than most Study Abroad Centers. There are advantages of the office being entirely run by faculty - as everyone is part of the faculty pool. Helps with curricular development, course articulation, and general support and advocacy from the entire faculty body. The faculty senate appoints all members of the Center's Advisory board - which is our curriculum committee and policy-making body. Faculty members who are appointed as resident directors of programs - are continued to be funded by their department/colleges. The advantage is that it is part of the teaching load at university research opportunity + counts toward tenure and promotion as well. The focus of our programs for the students is to complete degree requirements abroad and for faculty to teach, mentor students, and conduct research abroad.
3. I served in a blended position for five years. I’m happy to chat with you about the challenges and advantages. In short, the greatest advantages were truly “knowing” the faculty experience having moved through the tenure process at the institution, understanding our student population and having the respect of fellow faculty. The challenges were time, time and winning the respect of the staff that reported to me, some who had been in international education for many years before I was appointed Director.

Release time is at the university’s case-by-case discretion:

1. We currently have a study abroad director who serves as staff in that role. However, we don’t have a coordinator/director for international student and scholar services, and thus we are considering a release time for a faculty member to serve in that role.

2. The idea was that a faculty member would work with faculty and lead the development of the academic part of programs while working along side professional staff to assist. In the end, our former president decided that it wasn't a good time to pull a full-time faculty member out of the classroom. I still think it has merits. I also believe that professional staff are necessary to execute programs well as they have the training and experience. I personally like the partnership model between faculty and staff.
3. When we have a program coordinator go on short term faculty led programs they are typically administrators with risk management expertise. Their trip is paid for and they go as part of their normal working hours. We have not had another faculty person serve as PC on a program/trip. If we did, we would probably provide a stipend. If we had someone whose role was exclusively to provide program assistance, we would probably negotiate a course release. Just be mindful that the hours are equivalent. The site can help you define equivalent hours.

However, I do have a senior faculty member working with me in my office. She will retire in after next year and has expertise in our programs. She is getting course release to serve in this capacity.

Part of full-time administrative coordinators are recommended over faculty:

1. I provide leadership for the Study Abroad office in addition to Service Learning and Learning Communities. Additionally, we have a full-time manager of Study Abroad programs.
2. For consistency purposes with regard to policy, application processes and administrative duties, I think a part time or full time administrative coordinator would be better than a faculty member. Some faculty are fantastic with responsibilities such as these, but for the most part, I feel few have the administrative talents necessary in administering study abroad – especially, when their primary focus is to teach. With that said, if you have a specific person in mind, they seem to be a good fit, and the position is not on a rotation, it might work well for you.
3. We settled on hiring a full time staff member and we are very pleased that we did this. At that time we had a lot to learn about risk management and policies for study abroad and having a staff member who was a member of NAFSA really helped us "professionalize" our operations. Given all the changes in risk management, finance, tracking, insurance, etc, those back of the house items are really crucial to get right.

The strength of faculty is in their advocacy and advising, and we have found ways to reach out and engage a large number of faculty on campus. If you would like to chat about it, I am open to a conversation if you feel it would help.