

International Programs' Impact

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At the start of each New Year, and new term, those of us in academia return from a holiday break refreshed and prepared to begin again. At the start of 2020, I found myself looking forward to the new stories, experiences, and the transformations of our students. It has always been these moments and experiences our students take part in that drives my purpose to foster a global community. Of course, this year would be different, and we all would be tested professionally in ways that most could not imagine. It was January 21st when I received an email from Gonzaga University's Risk Manager, one that will forever be etched in my memory. It was a forwarded email regarding an outbreak in Wuhan, China, and it simply said, "Do we need to talk about this?"

Gonzaga has a long tradition of international education. In 1963, Gonzaga University established the Gonzaga in Florence program. The program was one of the first of its kind in Italy. That initial first step, almost sixty years ago, transformed the University to a global institution. Today, scholars from around the globe teach and research both in our Spokane and Florence campuses; more than 200 international students come to Spokane to participate in our English Language Program or to pursue a degree, and they fully immerse themselves into campus life, including several impressive international scholar athletes. Further, an impressive 56.3% of our undergraduate students study abroad.



What followed after that fateful email was a whirlwind of activity for weeks that ultimately resulted in Gonzaga students and faculty returning home from around the globe. From the end of January to the end of March, days were filled with conflicting information from international agencies and government organizations, appreciative parents, frustrated parents, grateful students, and disappointed students. When we made the decision to close Gonzaga in Florence, several parents and students thought our actions were extreme, with some even saying, "This is just like the flu, why are you overacting?"

At the time that we started bringing students home from Italy, we were most worried not about our students getting COVID-19, but what the governments of Italy were going to do. Would our students be quarantined in Florence? If so, for how long? Once we made the decision to bring students back to the U.S., they expressed frustration and sadness that their program was ending a month early. Some parents argued that their students should be able to remain abroad and in the student housing, or they would just spend the rest of their time "wandering Europe." On March 11th, President Trump made an announcement to the world that the United States would be closing our borders to Europe.

March 11th was the tipping point for all Study Abroad professionals. Everybody was scrambling to assist students with return travel arrangements, reassure parents, and also dealing with a profound grief that students would not be able to complete their life altering experiences. That night, Gonzaga's Center for Global Engagement was open until 11 pm assisting students.

Later, when dealing with logistics and when some of the chaos has settled, we witnessed incredible generosity, with some of our students requesting that they not receive housing refunds for their study abroad experience, but instead requested their refund be given to their host family. In those moments, you realize the ultimate goal of study abroad has been achieved: when students realize that we are all a lot more similar than we are different.

While Gonzaga was assisting all of the study abroad students in returning home, we were also providing support to our international students who were wondering if they should go home or stay in the U.S. Students from China had been struggling with that question since January. Gonzaga's international students elected to stay because they knew that going home in January might mean they would not make it back to the U.S. for the foreseeable future. Once Gonzaga announced that it would be moving to an on-line model to complete the semester, international students were forced to revisit their decision to stay. In the end, about 70 international students stayed in Spokane. Some students were forced to stay, as was the case for two of our Egyptian students who could not leave the U.S. even if they wanted to, because their country was closed to all flights. We discouraged students from flying to neighboring countries and trying to drive across the border.

As I write this article, it's early June and we are still waiting to see if we will be able to send students abroad this fall or bring international students to Spokane. The hurdles that face all of our colleagues in international education are daunting. When will the U.S. open up Embassies so international students can obtain a visa? Will study abroad students be allowed to enter other countries? Under what conditions?

While my colleagues across the U.S. grapple with all of these concerns, I firmly believe that international education is more important than ever before. I think Jesuit Superior General Adolfo Nicolas, S.J. said it best, *"The new context of Globalization requires us to act as universal body with a universal mission realizing at the same time the radical diversity of our situation. It is as a worldwide community and simultaneously as a network of local communities that we seek to serve others across the world."* We need to recognize our interconnectedness and our affect on one another.