

The Vienna Diplomatic Program: Goals and Outcomes in a Non-Traditional Study Abroad Program

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Abstract

The University of Illinois' Vienna Diplomatic Program provides a nontraditional, semester-long study abroad opportunity for students interested in international organizations. It is grounded in a philosophy of experiential learning that combines study abroad and learning-by-doing in a capstone research project. The VDP is one of several programs using the administrative auspices of the University's Austria-Illinois Exchange Program for its infrastructure.

Students in the VDP may take English-language courses on international relations at our Vienna partner universities, or take German-language courses if their skills are sufficiently advanced. While in Vienna, each student writes a major research paper on one of the international organizations in Vienna. The Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law, and the European Union have been the most popular subjects for research.

Students report very high levels of satisfaction with the program. Students tend to come from political science, economics, and history, and appreciate having a study abroad program with a social-science and public policy focus. Student satisfaction is evident in the important role of word-of-mouth in publicizing the program.

Graduates have gone on to both research-oriented and policy-oriented positions. Another group seems to have benefited from immersion into the transnational community of the expatriate, leading them to careers based on cross-cultural exchange and globalized society. Because the program is less than ten years old, we do not yet know its effect on the long-term career paths of its alumni.

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The Vienna Diplomatic Program (VDP) at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) gives undergraduate students an opportunity to combine study abroad with an independent research project on any international organization with offices in Vienna. Because Vienna is a United Nations City, and attracts non-UN organizations such as the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, students have a range of organizations to study while taking classes at our partner universities (the Universität Wien and the Wirtschaftsuniversität).

Outcomes include the effects on students, participating faculty, and institutions both in Illinois and Austria. By lowering the cost to faculty of leading time-intensive experiential programs, institutional relationships play a key role in supporting such programs. Success of the VDP, in turn, contributes to a dense network of relationships between UIUC and our partners in Vienna. This makes future program innovations even easier, and contributes to administrative support for traditional study abroad programs.

Description of program

The VDP began in 2005, using the administrative auspices of the university's Austria-Illinois Exchange Program (AIEP). After years with two, one, and four students, it has reached a steady level of 8-10 students a year. The program is ultimately constrained by housing availability, as AIEP's several programs may have fifty-odd students in residence at a time.

Students apply for admission in September of each year, going abroad in Spring semester (January-May in Illinois; February-June in Vienna). Juniors make up the largest share of the students, though many sophomores and seniors also participate. One freshman has participated

as well. Most students are majoring in Political Science or Global Studies, followed by Economics or History.

The program does not require any German-language skills, though about one-third of the students have had some German. Students take German language courses while in Vienna unless their skills place them out of this requirement. This helps achieve goals of cultural literacy associated with any study abroad program, even a non-traditional one (Bowman and Jennings 2005).

Academic model. Once admitted to the program, students spend three weeks in class in Illinois in January and February. These sessions provide pre-departure orientation and some preliminary academic advising. During this period, the students study three general approaches to the study of international relations (IR)—Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism.

To demonstrate their understanding of key concepts, and to introduce them to the international organizations (IOs) in Vienna, students write two short papers during this session. The first paper requires that they study one of the IOs in Vienna, and interpret it using one of the three approaches. In the second paper, they analyze a different IO using a different approach. By presenting these papers to the seminar, and receiving peer comments, the students develop an initial understanding of the organizations. They also obtain some practice applying IR theories to international organizations, a key skill for their capstone projects.

After this preliminary session, students arrive in Vienna in mid-February. They have two weeks of orientation and academic advising under AIEP auspices. Unless waived, they take a German language course appropriate to their initial skills (if any). The College of Letters, Arts and Sciences at Illinois requires two years of a college language, and VDP students have usually

completed this requirement before participating. As a result, most are already experienced language learners who can develop survival German skills quickly.

Students also take a full load of courses at our partner universities (UW and WU). VDP students normally take advantage of our partner's English-language offerings, in departments such as political science, history, law, and economics. Because these offerings are plentiful, student experiences vary considerably. We will not attempt to assess outcomes from these courses since students would likely take comparable courses back home in Illinois.

Research paper. In addition to their coursework, students conduct research leading to a major research paper. They are required to conduct primary source research, using IO libraries and archives, interviewing staff, or at a minimum making use of official documents.

Students write the research paper in several stages. They begin with a paper that asks them to define their topic, present a research question, give a preliminary thesis as answer to the question, and provide an initial list of sources. About three-fourths of the students use one of the two IOs they studied in the Illinois session, though they often change the theoretical apparatus they use.

After this, students must present a detailed outline and plan of research. Several weeks later they write a rough draft of about 15 pages, followed by a final paper that averages about 25 pages. Students receive face-to-face advice from Prof. Bruce Murray of AIEP during the research process, and virtual mentoring from me.

To date, we have used email for most of the long-distance mentoring. To supplement email we have occasionally scheduled online chats through Facebook's chat function. Moodle would provide an alternative chat platform, one in which audio chat would also be easy to

implement. It would allow multiple people to participate simultaneously. Skype could provide audiovisual discussion where appropriate, but we have not yet found a need for that (on learning outcomes with asynchronous online tools, see Baker 2002).

The theoretical exercises in the Illinois sessions have proved to be a valuable part of the research paper process. Instead of conducting truly original research, most students end up interpreting an IO with one of the three stock approaches in the field. This narrow range of likely papers has proved to be a considerable advantage for the program. Unlike other undergraduate research programs at Illinois, we do not have to cover the full range of possible research strategies and designs in political science. Instead, we can focus on only a few theories, usually applied to a single case study.

They learn how to move between theory and evidence while constructing their own interpretation of a case. This gives them good literature review and theoretical skills, while introducing them to the process of writing a major research paper. A few students have collected some data for quantitative analysis, relying on skills they had acquired before entering the VDP.

Non-academic programs. Students also take advantage of various non-academic programs offered by AIEP while they are in Vienna. These include excursions that introduce them to some part of Austrian culture, such as a bicycle ride through the Wachau, attending a football (soccer) game, or hearing an opera. The presence of VDP has added events to this repertoire, with AIEP students visiting one or two IOs each spring (usually the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development or the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries).

Marketing. We market the VDP through several on-campus programs—Political Science, Global Studies, German Languages and Literatures (GLL), the Study Abroad Office, and the European Union Center (EUC). Course announcements, flyers, email lists, and (more recently) Facebook have provided ways to disseminate information about the program. We also participate in Study Abroad Fairs and similar events on campus.

We have a dedicated website for the program, cross-linked with the EUC and GLL/AIEP. With enough information (and photographs), this can whet the students' appetite for what they'll experience. It also answers a lot of the recurrent questions, though we still spend a lot of time answering questions in person that were already answered on the website. Perhaps most important, a website provides information to parents who are concerned about the program. I've heard both directly and indirectly that having lots of information on the website conveys to parents the fact that a faculty member knows what they're doing.

Having up to six distinct programs linking Vienna and UIUC (Jenkins and Wade 2010; Murray 2010) also aids recruitment. Programs effectively cross-recruit, referring students to one another to help serve each student's needs better. Some of these programs, such as the summer programs, can also provide a "starter" experience for students fearful of a longer study abroad.

Word of mouth has also become an important part of marketing and recruitment, with one-fourth to one-third of the students being friends of program alumni. It has taken a few years to develop good word-of-mouth, a fact that makes program continuity an important part of the program's success. Word-of-mouth recruiting is also a good measure of student satisfaction with the program.

Administration. The VDP depends critically on the infrastructural support of the Study Abroad Office, GLL/AIEP, and AIEP Resident Director Bruce Murray. Creating the program required the AIEP infrastructure and relationships build in previous collaboration between Illinois and Vienna. Piggy-backing on AIEP required the German department to tolerate some free-riding by the VDP students in the first few years. VDP students now pay AIEP fees, carrying their own weight in supporting the infrastructure.

Because word-of-mouth is so important in marketing, any new program should expect small numbers for several years. At a large public university like Illinois, these small numbers do not justify giving the instructor credit for a course taught. Nor can small numbers support an overseas director. This highlights the importance of having infrastructure and personnel already on site.

Ideally, the extra workload would be compensated with some sort of overload. As Bowman and Jennings (2005:78) note, “Study abroad is a labor of love, but directors deserve reasonable remuneration.” Ignoring that advice at first, we decided to define this program as part of our existing administrative workloads as EUC director (Pahre) and overseas program director (Murray), respectively. This gave the program enough room to grow for a few years before discussing the long-term administration of the program. This flexibility would not have been possible for untenured faculty or entry-level staff whose jobs might have been jeopardized by low enrollments and diversion of energy from research, teaching, and other duties.

That last point takes us to the main reason why instructors lead non-traditional courses—because they have become convinced of the merit of these innovative teaching programs (see *inter alia* Bowman and Jennings 2005; DeClair 2004; Fitzpatrick 2008; Thies 2005). Skeptical administrators who have never led such a program might ask themselves why veterans tend to

become strong advocates of such experiences both for themselves and for others. This would help them understand the need for strong training programs for faculty considering experiential learning. Unfortunately, most instructors in such programs, like their students, tend to do a lot of learning-by-doing (Gilin and Young 2009; Katula and Threnhauser 2003).

Philosophy: experiential learning

From the beginning, we have conceived the VDP as combining two types of experiential learning, study abroad and a research practicum. Experiential learning traces its intellectual heritage to John Dewey (1859-1952), an eminent philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer. His thinking reflected the reformism of his Progressive Era, along with the first widening of college student populations. He called for a pragmatic education, linking knowing to doing (Katula and Threnhauser 2003: 240-241). Like later followers (i.e., Kolb 1984), Dewey (1938) saw experiential education as a way to reach minorities, working classes and the poor, and non-traditional students (Cantor 1997; Rolls 1992).

The “experiential learning” label encompasses a wide variety of non-classroom models, linked by a focus on “the process whereby knowledge is created through transformation of experience” (Kolb 1984: 41). Examples of such learning include practicum experiences, internships, community service programs, and study abroad. All of them provide an active learning experience, giving students the opportunity to apply traditional classroom theory directly to practice outside the classroom (Ishiyama 2009). This is why we classify the VDP research project as a form of experiential learning. These models exploit that intellectual confrontation between theory and practice, hoping that experience will reinforce what students have learned elsewhere. Observing an IO and interviewing some of its staff can help students

understand organizational structures and behavior in a professional working environment.

Study abroad programs provide another form of experiential learning, improving second-language acquisition and providing cultural education (Hopkins 1999). Research suggests that students in study abroad programs learn better, are more engaged, often more prepared, and more enthusiastic (DeClair 2004; Thies 2005). Study abroad can also motivate students to participate in the research project of the modern university (Bowman and Jennings 2005).

Though German language skills are not a prerequisite for the VDP, students are required to take German while in Vienna. Being located in Vienna motivates these students to develop at least basic skills. Experiencing life in a city where one does not know the language also demonstrates in a very real way the importance of language acquisition—even in a city such as Vienna where almost everyone speaks some English. Almost all students, whatever their language skills, report that they wish they had had stronger German before arriving. A significant share, perhaps 20%, decide to continue study of German after their return, having developed an interest in the language and/or Austrian culture.

Perhaps more important, study abroad is often a life-changing event that helps students expand their personal horizons, and expose themselves to new ideas (DeClair 2004). This kind of personal development all too often falls outside how we think about university education. Though our student audiences consist mostly of young adults, university education has generally not thought about how to bring personal development and social skills into the traditional academic curriculum. Personal development is an essential part of what goes on in a college student's life, but the university defines it as something outside the educational system. The VDP hopes to contribute to students' personal development as well as their professional and academic development.

Evaluation and assessment: student outcomes

Evaluating an experiential learning program poses several challenges. Because it is non-random, student “assignment” to groups is problematic for program evaluation. The significant cost and time investment required of students makes any field course student population differ from the classroom population in terms of variables associated with academic performance and other outcomes (Gilin and Young 2009).

In addition, the practical and ethical obstacles to comparative program evaluation in this area are great. For example, it is typically not feasible to follow experimental design, and it may even be unethical to have a control group who does not receive a “treatment” that the instructor believes is valuable.

Furthermore, some intended outcomes can only be evaluated in the long term. John Dewey (1938: 36) argued that one goal of experiential education was to “create conditions for further growth.” This suggests that evaluation must look at students’ career paths over some time. This is difficult for a program as new as the VDP. However, we remain in contact with all of the program’s alumni, and can follow them through their graduate study and/or entry-level professional careers.

Finally, the practice of study abroad programs counsels some caution in making strong claims about the effectiveness of experiential learning programs. In a careful review of the field, Katula and Threnhauser (2003: 247) were unable to find any comparative data that would show that a university-sponsored study abroad program improves learning any more than, say, personal travel abroad. This absence of evidence does not represent evidence of absence, of course, but it does suggest the need to think about how to compare program outcomes with an

imaginary population of non-program outcomes.

To address these various challenges, this section is explicitly comparative and necessarily impressionistic. It asks whether VDP outcomes are better or worse than the outcomes from comparable non-experiential courses and programs. We are attentive to personal development as well as academic and professional objectives.

Undergraduate research papers. The author has supervised many undergraduate research papers over a twenty year career. The mode of supervision has varied, including a traditional faculty-advised format, in a seminar-supported honors program, and in the VDP.

Based on these many dozens of papers, it is easy to say that the VDP products clearly outperform the faculty-advised format. Having a peer group with the same deadlines and expectations clearly helps achieve this outcome.

It is difficult to draw systematic comparisons with the department's new honors program, one that includes students from subfields of political science other than international relations (who are therefore not observed by me). Impressionistically, the VDP students perform about as well. VDP students have GPAs of at least 3.0, and usually above 3.25, while honors students have GPAs above 3.5. This suggests that the VDP helps sub-honors students improve their research abilities to a level comparable to those of their honors peers.

The sharper focus of the VDP compared to an honors program doubtless contributes to this outcome. The honors program provides structure not found in a faculty-led thesis, including training and exercises on research questions, research design, hypothesis testing, and similar topics. While the honors program must serve the diversity of the entire discipline, the VDP need only serve a narrow set of topics. VDP students also draw from a constrained menu of

theoretical approaches. Because they share those approaches, they can learn from one another more easily than a discipline-wide seminar can.

Beyond these factors, we must also mention the study abroad location. Students appear to be much more motivated by primary research on-site. Only one student has failed to complete the research paper, a success rate much higher than in these other programs.

Self-reported personal development. Impressionistically, study abroad induces personal growth comparable to students' decision to go away to college. They not only need to learn how to live on their own, but they must relearn many social behaviors and institutions that they take for granted back home. To take one mundane example, students in Vienna must hail a waiter or waitress in order to pay a restaurant bill, behavior that would be considered rude in the United States.

Students report that learning many such cultural differences helps them develop greater empathy. Having been a foreigner helped students understand the plight of foreigners in the United States. Being English speakers in Vienna helps them appreciate the challenges of everyone who must operate in a second-language environment, and in a foreign cultural setting.

Students also typically report that the program leads to unspecified "personal enlightenment" or "personal development." One defined this as a "deeper, more tangible understanding of the surrounding world." Such development is very hard for outsiders to observe, but self-reports from a reflective participant provide a good indicator of the growth.

Post-VDP education and careers. Because the VDP is still new, we can only track alumni for five years. Even in this short period, several paths are evident.

First, several students have gone to graduate school. At least two are planning to apply to PhD programs, based in part on their experience with the research paper. They report that the capstone research project helped them realize that this career path suits their talents and interests. These students were already considering this option, but their work on the research paper experience seems to have solidified these plans.

The research experience has also strengthened students' applications for future study. One alumna reports that the skills developed during her primary source research helped her obtain admission to the Monterey Institute of International Studies, where she is working toward an MBA in International Project Management and a Master's in Development Policy. In addition, law school is a popular option for program alumni, as it is for political science majors in general.

Second, some students have pursued career opportunities in foreign relations of various kinds, including diplomacy and intelligence. This option clearly builds on their experience working with an international organization in Vienna, as well as reflecting a prior interest in international relations that led these students to VDP in the first place. They identify the program as a valuable experience and a distinctive credential, contributing to personal development and to a stronger resume.

Third, students have built on their successful international experience to pursue other international careers. One teaches English in Shanghai. Most surprising, several students have used the VDP experience as professional training in support of international conference planning. One student leveraged his VDP experience in being accepted as a member of the Planning Committee for Amnesty International's 50th Anniversary Conference in San Francisco. Several years after graduation, another alumna organized a conference in Vienna, using contacts

from study abroad in Vienna and Berlin. None of these alumni plan international conferences full-time, though another alumna of the EUC does.

Speculating a bit, the immersion experience within the context of an English-language academic program and research project seems to provide a distinctive cultural experience. This latter group of students appears to have learned how to be a footloose expat in a global society. This is not the deep linguistic and cultural experience of a traditional study abroad program, but in anthropological terms this transnational world of the expatriate is a social system of its own. Apparently the VDP has provided an unintended immersion experience in that community.

Summary. Participants seem to have done better as a result of their VDP experience than they would have in other study abroad programs or by staying at home. I conclude, with Barbara Gilin and Tom Young (2009: 45), “that the students’ personal engagement in the experience generated a level of learning that we have not seen in more conventional courses.” Unfortunately, for reasons noted above, this evidence is more comparative and impressionistic than would be generated from a controlled experiment.

Institutional outcomes

The VDP is embedded in a series of personal and institutional relationships. As a result, its successes should be counted as an outcome of some institutions and programs, while it will itself produce future outcomes.

The VDP could not exist without the AIEP infrastructure. For this reason, the program should be counted as an outcome of the AIEP. Thanks to strong support from the EUC and GLL throughout its existence, it should also be counted as an outcome of those programs. University

support for the administrative burden of this and similar programs are essential (Bowman and Jennings 2005).

In addition, the director's participation stemmed from experience in three month-long summer programs that also built on AIEP and Illinois' SAO support. The faculty leader's on-the-job training in experiential learning stems directly from these summer programs. Since ceasing his own involvement, he recruited two other faculty who have each offered their own courses on two occasions.

The VDP also reflects previous relationships, not discussed above. Foremost among these was a five-year program, the Good Governance Consortium, funded with a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) in the U.S. Department of Education and the European Commission. The GGC provided the institutional foundation for the VDP project. Though the GGC is currently dormant, the relationships built in that project helped lay the foundation for the Illinois-Vienna relationship in VDP.

Similarly, working on the VDP has helped build personal and institutional relationships for other projects. The UI's European Union Center has developed an M.A. in European Union Studies, the first such degree outside Europe. This M.A. program includes international internship and study abroad options, and the Vienna relationships will provide the first opportunity for students to pursue these options. As these relationships continue, we expect that an M.A.-level exchange program will become an institutional outcome of the VDP.

All of these institutions have benefited from external grants. In addition to those mentioned above, the EUC has received grants from the Title VI National Resource Center program of the U.S. Department of Education. It was founded in 1999 with key support from the

Directorate for External Relations of the European Commission. These grants have provided travel, overhead, and similar funds that all helped make the VDP possible.

This dense network of programs linking Illinois to Vienna (Jenkins and Wade 2010; Murray 2010) has two further benefits. As noted above, cross-recruiting, word-of-mouth, and repeat participants all aid recruitment. Second, embedding the VDP in a wider curriculum enhances learning outcomes. Returning students engage in on-campus programs linked to the EU Center and other sponsoring units, reinforcing the learning and immersion experiences. Embedding a study abroad experience in a wider curriculum of pre-departure and post-departure study enhances student outcomes (Kruse and Brubaker 2007).

Challenges

Non-traditional programs such as the VDP face several challenges (Bowman and Jennings 2005). The first challenge lies at the core of the model, which permits an English-language experience in a German-speaking environment. This inevitably limits access to the host culture. This challenge is somewhat mitigated by students' immersion in a community of Austrian and other European students who speak English, and who can introduce VDP students to Austrian culture.

A second challenge is found in the existence of the program itself. With a group of 8-10 students taking similar classes, the VDP risks forming a "bubble" in which the primary social interactions occur with other VDP students. This can discourage interaction with people from the host culture.

Being one of many programs from the same home university also poses some questions for the suite of programs. The VDP is one of several English-language programs from UIUC,

including a program from the College of Business and occasional summer session courses from Anthropology and Political Science. Social contacts with traditional study abroad students can weaken the traditional students' own immersion in Austrian culture.

Finally, technology is an enemy in efforts to encourage cultural learning. Director Lonnie Johnson of the Austrian-American Educational Commission has observed, "Physically, American students are in Vienna, but mentally they are still back home" (personal communication). Facebook, Skype, email, chat, text, internet, and other technology means that American students in Vienna remain immersed in their home community and culture. This reduces their exposure to, and immersion in, their host culture. This problem is obviously shared by all study abroad programs today, and will only get worse as technology improves.

Conclusions

Though short, experiential or field courses can provide a life-transforming experience. Students often decide to change their major, career plans, or other personal goals after an experiential course.

These programs can also transform the instructors. They depend on motivated instructors, who expose themselves to novel forms of teaching. Learning-by-doing, these motivated instructors help their students learn by doing as well.

Colleges and universities are designed to provide a certain type of education, easily derided as an assembly-line model. Faculty at research universities are evaluated almost entirely in terms of research productivity even if they also require a certain level of teaching performance (in political science, see Rothgeb and Burger 2009). Because experiential courses, like other teaching, is not particularly rewarded, leadership here imposes a "tax upon the educator" (Dewey

1938: 40) at the research university.

Institution-building can help reduce that tax. By providing good infrastructure, universities can make it much easier for their faculty to experiment with experiential learning opportunities. This infrastructure feeds on itself, developing new relationships and sustaining old ones. Those experiences provide new experiential opportunities for our students.

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