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Building a Resilient LIASE Program by Developing Multiple Field Sites

ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

Most LIASE-sponsored programs incorporate some type of fieldwork in Asia as a primary element. Sustaining these field sites over the long term is vulnerable to varying levels of faculty commitment, personal relationships with overseas partner institutions, and the vicissitudes of student interest, especially given the small student pools at liberal arts colleges. Eckerd College has met this challenge by using a joint on-campus program to feed into multiple field research locations, which broadens the opportunities for faculty and student engagement. It has also allowed us to let some field sites lapse when they were not working out, without undermining the integrity and continuity of the overall program.

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One of the most significant challenges for the development of an ambitious grant-funded program at a small liberal arts college is the problem of sustainability. This is especially the case when, as is the case with most of the programs developed under the Luce Initiative for Asian Studies and the Environment (LIASE), the program centers on overseas field experiences, which are both expensive for students and time-consuming for faculty to manage on an ongoing basis. In a perfect world, a small college would have a deeply committed faculty member, especially one in an environmental or science-related field, who is willing to develop a program, recruit students, and devote the time and energy necessary to maintain the research vigor of the field site over many years. Many LIASE-funded programs have been launched by, or at least have had the participation of, a faculty member who performs this role and is (perhaps tacitly) expected to do so for the foreseeable future.

This approach leaves LIASE-funded programs vulnerable, however, since it is highly dependent on the participation of a single key person and their relationship with partner faculty at a single field site in Asia. And, as we all know, *stuff happens*: faculty members have health and family issues (e.g., babies, aging parents, or personal health crises), they go on leave, and they may even decide to take a job elsewhere. They may encounter intractable problems working with research colleagues and institutions in Asia. And they may shift their research interests over time, perhaps to sites not in Asia (if they are not primarily in an Asia-related field). These problems become more likely over time, as grant funding expires and faculty engagement moves on from the first flush of intellectual excitement to the thrum of ongoing program maintenance. In other words, the problem of program sustainability is often one of program *resilience* against these almost inevitable, but nonetheless often unexpected, developments.

The Asia and the Environment Initiative at Eckerd College has built resilience into its program from the very beginning. Eckerd College is dominated by programs in marine science, biology, and environmental studies; students with these majors make up over half the student body, and these programs have more than two dozen dedicated faculty members. By comparison, our interdisciplinary East Asian Studies Program is small, with only a few dozen students taking a major or minor or enrolled in an Asian language and only five full-time faculty members, most of whom have primary commitments to their home departments rather than to the East Asian Studies Program. As a result, we recognized from the start that a LIASE-funded program was only going to have a substantial impact if it recruited heavily from students in science and environmental fields, engaging students and faculty who were not yet committed to the study of Asia. The program we developed involved faculty colleagues outside of Asian studies from the very beginning as well as the use of multiple field sites in Asia. The result turned out to be a broad-based, flexible structure which has proven resilient against considerable (one might say inevitable) fluctuations in faculty availability and commitment. Our experience offers some important lessons for program design that we did not fully appreciate when we were starting out.

RESILIENCE THROUGH THE USE OF MULTIPLE FIELD SITES

The Asia and the Environment Initiative was initially designed during our 2012–13 LIASE exploratory phase with three key elements: (1) language study, (2) sustained coursework on campus, and (3) on-site fieldwork in Asia. The genesis of the multi-site model, however, was almost accidental. We began with a large pool of twelve faculty participants, six from Asian studies and six from the sciences and environmental studies. The latter group had a wide range of interests in different field sites for research, and our Asian studies faculty were adaptable to facilitating any of them. As a result, we decided to not select just a single field site or a single theme to focus on, since that would have left a lot of our participants much less engaged with the program. Rather than put all of our eggs in one basket, we launched explorations of several different field sites, partner institutions, and research themes, assuming in advance that some would work out better than others and some might not work at all. This approach meant that we could allow sites to undergo transitions, or lapse altogether, while others continued and flourished, thereby sustaining the overall program. This turned out to be a considerable strength.

We initially targeted five different field locations and sent faculty pairs to all five: one in Japan, two in mainland China, one in Hong Kong, and one in Indonesia. All five sites were chosen based in part on preexisting institutional relationships, but some were stronger than others; interestingly, the strongest preexisting ties were not always the ones that were most successful. At present, more than five years on, two of the sites are no longer part of the program, each for different reasons. One had weak preexisting ties, and the key faculty member (in environmental studies) left the college unexpectedly, leading us to decide the site was not worth further investment. At the other, we continue to have very good institutional ties with the partner institution, but the key scientific research partnership we sought did not work out, and the leading Asian studies faculty member (who was untenured) also left the college, so we again decided to allow that summer field program to lapse. We may renew it at a future date if there is revived interest and capacity.

The other three programs are still going strong but have evolved into significantly different models. Perhaps the simplest arrangement is the exchange based in Hong Kong, where we have a single highly committed faculty

member from our marine science program who has a tight relationship with the biology program at our partner institution. They now regularly send their own students to Eckerd to do marine science field research in alternating summers, and we have a variety of reciprocal agreements that make the program very affordable for both sides. As a result, the program is quite robust and could potentially be directed by another faculty member if necessary.

The Japan program offers a very different model, in which the critical link has been the Asian studies faculty member in Japanese language and culture. She has worked with two different non-Asia-specialist colleagues, in marine science and environmental studies, who have helped recruit and lead student groups for summer research. Yet both of them, for different reasons, have been unable to make a regular commitment to running the program. While our faculty member is fully capable of running the program herself, she continues to seek faculty from science and/or environmental fields who might be interested in developing a research agenda in Japan.

The Indonesia program represents a third model quite unlike the other two. It was initially designed and run by a marine biologist with a field research program in mangrove ecology, using multiple partner institutions and several locations in Indonesia. She was partnered with an Asian studies colleague (myself) with a background in Southeast Asia, albeit one without a significant field research interest. After leading several iterations of the program, the marine biologist is no longer able to participate, due primarily to health and family reasons. Rather than allow the program to lapse, I am reworking the program to be a bit more like the Hong Kong program: more strongly dependent on the faculty at a single Asian partner institution and potentially suitable for any of several faculty colleagues to lead. I have also recruited a new faculty colleague from the sciences to develop an active research program in Indonesia, draw in student interest, and lead the program at least occasionally.

The three field programs also have diverged in small but significant ways to accommodate different sorts of constituencies. The Hong Kong program is the most strongly focused on scientific research, though it welcomes students with little or no laboratory or field experience. The Japan program has been primarily focused on environmental and cultural research. The Indonesia program was initially focused on serious scientific field research but is moving to accommodate a broader environmental and service-learning model.

Another difference is in how the programs handle language requirements. Initially all of the programs were equivalent, requiring a year of Japanese or Mandarin Chinese on campus or an intensive short course in Indonesian at the start of the summer program. We have subsequently relaxed the language requirement for the Hong Kong program to a recommendation, in part because Mandarin is a much less significant language there than it is in the PRC, and in part to ensure our ability to recruit students in the sciences, most of whom cannot meet the language requirement but would nonetheless benefit from participating.

RESILIENCE THROUGH OTHER ASPECTS OF OVERALL PROGRAM DESIGN

Several other aspects of the design of the Asia and the Environment Initiative have turned out to be important in building program resilience and coherence. The initial decision to designate two faculty members (one from Asian studies, one from the sciences) as responsible for each field site turned out to be essential for the resilience of each program. In every case, at least one of the two initial faculty members is no longer able to take a substantive role in running the program. The fact that every program had two responsible faculty leaders has allowed them to survive despite such setbacks. The remaining faculty leaders can also potentially recruit faculty colleagues who were not part of the original 2012 cohort (especially new faculty hires) to develop research programs at their field sites. Doing so broadens the range of students that are likely to be recruited into the program and builds in further resilience against future setbacks.

Another important element of program resilience has been that the core on-campus course, Asian Environmental Issues, is not location-specific; a student takes the same course regardless of which field site they are going to. A student does focused research on their particular field site project as a part of the courses and meets several times with their field research faculty leader prior to departure. This also means that the faculty member teaching the on-campus course does not necessarily lead a field experience and the field leaders mostly do not teach the on-campus course, thereby lessening the size of the commitment for any one faculty member. Without such a structure, it would have been all but impossible for our marine science or environmental studies faculty to participate since they do not have time in their busy teaching schedules to offer a core course during the spring term. We also have two different Asian studies faculty who can teach the core course, which allows us to offer it when one is on leave or otherwise unable to do so.

Finally, the use of multiple field sites allows us to vary the locations of summer research opportunities each year, depending on who is available to run the programs and in response to student interest. If one field program has to lapse for a year or two due to faculty leave, a transition to new faculty leadership, or new institutional arrangements, the other field programs can take up the slack so that the overall program continues to operate. The structure also gives us the potential to develop new field sites in the future in response to new faculty interests and add them into the rotation.

Of course, the situation with the COVID-19 pandemic put an end to all of our overseas programs for 2020 and 2021. The political situation in Hong Kong will also require ongoing monitoring to see whether it remains a suitable field site. Nonetheless, due to the flexible nature of the program, we are confident that we will be able to continue with at least some of the current field sites, as well as to potentially develop new prospects.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The multiple field site model may at first sound overly complex and ambitious. There is no question that it required a relatively large initial team of interested faculty members and a lot more effort and coordination up front. However, that initial investment has paid off by giving us a "deep bench" of field sites, partner institutions, and engaged faculty colleagues that can share the load of maintaining and enriching the program. The experience offers several broader lessons for how to manage a program of this sort with the limited faculty resources of a small college.

First, Asian studies faculty play an absolutely critical role in program resilience, but it is not necessarily the role we might have expected. The most obvious model would have been to have one or more Asian studies faculty members maintain an environmentally focused research agenda at a field site in Asia and run the entire program themselves. However, most small colleges have only a few Asian studies faculty, and this model requires an enormous amount of time, energy, and commitment from just those few. Equally important, it is not always commensurate with the research interests of Asian studies faculty, and even when it is, the nature of such environmental research, which is often humanities-based, may not be a strong draw for the majority of students in the hard sciences.

What our model has evolved into is one in which Asian studies faculty may run the field research programs themselves when necessary but also take a leading role in facilitating the engagement of faculty colleagues whose primary investment is in scientific and environmental research. This significantly expands the pool of interested students and, when it runs well, relieves some of the burden on Asian studies faculty to lead environmentally focused study abroad programs. However, while Asian studies faculty have a perennial core mission to get students to learn about and travel to Asia, regardless of discipline, faculty in the natural and environmental sciences usually do not; they have choices about where to do their work. As an example, many of my colleagues can do comparable marine and environmental field research with students at sites in Central America and the Caribbean, which is a much shorter and less expensive flight, and usually a much lower language and cultural barrier to cross. Even if they do make an investment in doing research in Asia, they may eventually choose to shift their focus to other, non-Asian field sites. And, of course, they are susceptible to the vicissitudes of family, health, and career issues just as much as anybody else. As a consequence, Asian studies faculty need to take responsibility for actively *recruiting* faculty colleagues, in order to get them to invest in field research at an Asian field site. This is why it has been so important to our program's resilience to have a flexible core course and multiple field sites: it has allowed the program to cast a wide net, not just to capture potential *student* interest but also potential *science colleague* interest.

Second, funds from the Luce Foundation LIASE grant are well spent on sending science colleagues to Asia. By going in person, they can meet their counterparts at Asian partner institutions and begin to envision the benefits of developing an Asia-based research agenda. It is important to recognize that this is not just a one-time investment; it is an *ongoing* program need. After sending five teams to Asian field sites in the exploratory phase, we have subsequently used funds to send an environmental studies colleague to join with our Japan field program in order to help him prepare to run the program the following year. We anticipate doing the same for a new faculty colleague for the Indonesia program. Additional site visits and preparation might also be necessary in the case of turnover in the East Asian Studies Program (which we have thankfully avoided). The long-term sustainability of the program will depend on the administrative commitment of funds for this purpose, especially after funding from the LIASE grant itself expires. The designers and implementers of LIASE programs would be wise to anticipate this need in advance and build it into their program budgets from the start.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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