

## Confessions of a Study Abroad Coordinator

What was going through his mind as the water rose above his head? Was he thinking about his mother back home? Was he hoping someone would look over to see him struggling? Surely someone had to notice how he was grasping for the rocks, or heard his calls for help as he coughed up the water filling his lungs. Someone had to come save this boy who just moments before was wading in the calm waters of the river. Earlier this day, he had been safe and enjoying life. The country of Belize had to be a drastic change from his life back home. The rich green landscape surrounding the serene and tranquil river created a scene out of paradise. It was probably not on the minds of the group one of them would not be returning home from this remarkable journey abroad. Unfortunately, this trip would be his last. With his foot caught in something on the river bed, he drowned while the chaperones and other travelers looked the other way. This story was not mine to tell, but it has haunted my mind since I heard about it last year. A teenage boy drowned in a river while visiting the country of Belize for a school-sponsored study abroad trip. He was 14 years old. Stories such as this

are why people think I am crazy for doing what I do. As a Study Abroad Coordinator, I take on a tremendous level of accountability. I understand how my job sounds glamorous; we take students abroad for unforgettable adventures and explore ancient ruins, street markets, and engage with locals in language which is not our mother tongue. Sure, that's all grand. After taking on this position, I have traveled abroad more times in the last three years than many people have in their lifetime.

However, one mistake can cost a life and it keeps me up at night. We do not accept anyone under the age of 18 and think of these individuals as functioning adults. Unfortunately, this does not excuse us from our duties. Every move we make has to be accounted for and every head counted, twice. We do not leave for our next destination without our travelers repeating back to us our itinerary. No one goes off alone or even in twos. Three is the minimum for a group. Cell phones must be on your person at all times so that we can be in reach at any moment. And last, but not least, make smart decisions. These are the rules, but they are not foolproof.

When I accepted my position as a Humanities Instructor at Chattahoochee Technical College four years ago, I did not know how deeply involved I would become in the Study Abroad Program. Honestly, I had no idea such a program even existed since this was a technical college since it was not one of the more prestigious four-year universities like my alma mater, the neighboring Kennesaw State University. I was just happy to have accepted a position where I would be allowed to express my creativity and engage with people who were interested in what I had to say (despite the fact they were students and kind of required to listen to my lectures). My last position in communication was not nearly as prestigious in my opinion. I felt I was no more important than a piece of production equipment that was used when it was needed and disregarded after it served its purpose.

Not too long after the start of my second semester of teaching, I was approached by two of my colleagues asking for my help. One, Fred, teaches both English and Spanish and occupies the office across the hall from mine. The other,

Sonia, teaches both Human Communication and Public Speaking and rotates between two of our eight campuses spread across the northeast region of Georgia. They wanted to know if I would be willing to give up an assignment in my Humanities courses traveling students could complete for an upcoming trip to Spain for a 7-day study abroad program. After providing me with the details of the journey, and about the history of this small but growing program, I was happy to accept. Unbeknownst to me at the time, this agreement would be the start of my journey with this program and deeply involve my life in international education.

On top of providing an assignment, I made frequent announcements in my courses and spoke with any student who would listen in order to recruit more travelers. I even recruited one bright-eyed girl, Ariel, while I was ordering coffee at Starbucks. With the mention of Spain in our conversation, her eyes widened with excitement. I gave her my name so she could take my course, thus making her eligible to travel as part of the program. My colleagues were impressed when they heard how she learned about the program during one of the information sessions. In fact, they were so impressed, it was proposed that I would be accompanying them abroad but only if they could get the numbers needed. As spring semester 2014 slowly approached, the number of travelers steadily increased. If any more students enrolled for their trip, I was next in line to join as a chaperone. Crossing my fingers, I hoped I would be going to Spain.

However, when the time for departure came, I was not going anywhere. Despite the number of travelers quadrupling in just one year, there were not enough to justify my travel with the group. After receiving the news and watching as the students left for the airport on the Thursday before the start of Spring Break, I thought I had missed my chance at something great. That is until we returned to work following the break. Apparently, one of the students, Courtney, had been kicked off the departure flight because she had verbally assaulted one of the flight attendants, a federal offense. As the only Spanish-speaking instructor, Fred had to stay with Courtney while Sonia returned home with the travelers. Luckily, Fred negotiated her release and they were rebooked

onto a flight for the United States the next day. Because of the late departure, they did not return home for three days after the rest of the group who left Madrid on-time as scheduled.

While this incident occurred at the tail end of the trip, it was the last in a long series of problems for the Spain group. Before they departed, Courtney decided to disclose she was diagnosed as bipolar, had been self-medicating with the use of marijuana, and was quitting cold turkey for this upcoming trip. This disclosure should have been enough to cancel her travel but unfortunately, they did not have the paperwork to legally support her removal. This disclosure started a domino effect of trouble for the travelers. After arriving in Spain, the students were happy, smiling, and enjoying their experience in Spain. Then, disaster struck. The troubled student alleged her roommate, Annalise, stole money from her belongings in the hotel room. Since the theft could not be proven, there was nothing more my colleagues could do to help Courtney.

Later that day, while riding the metro through Madrid, Courtney became heated while watching Annalise converse with Fred and verbally assaulted her. Apparently, she felt Fred and Sonia were favoring Annalise during the alleged theft. This assault escalated to an accusation by Courtney that Annalise was romantically involved with Fred. The awkward claims were put to rest quickly, and the group fell silent as they waited for the train to pull away from a recent stop. Then, as the doors started to close, the troubled student backed off the train. Without hesitation, Sonia leaped out of the train to catch her just as the doors shut and the train sped off leaving the two of them alone on the platform with no idea where the rest of the group were destined to depart the train.

Admittedly, while Courtney was a royal pain, she was not the only one. Accompanying Courtney was Lacy, her sister, who apparently had a strong aversion to seafood. While she made mention of this distaste, she neglected to mention she could not even be around the smell of seafood. This may seem like a small nuisance compared to an extreme headache her sister caused while abroad. However, knowing traditional Spanish cuisine, they tend to eat a hefty amount of seafood and therefore for the duration of their trip, they had to avoid any place

with seafood. The sister also had a severe case of irritable bowel syndrome which made frequent bathroom stops a must.

Another student, Stacy, gave my colleagues the shock of a lifetime when they arrived for their tour of the Royal Palace in Madrid. After being informed about the mandatory security screening before entering the Palace by the Tour Director, this student proceeded to extract a hunting knife the length of one's forearm from her bag and asked where she should secure it. Well, not only were Fred and Sonia embarrassed such an incident occurred, but weapons such as this are illegal in Spain. After explaining the situation to the Tour Director, he agreed to remain on the bus to protect the precious knife while the group headed off for the tour. While Stacy meant no ill will by carrying the object with her, it made for an unforgettable story. (By the way, the hunting knife was given to her by her boyfriend for protection).

After the sickening fish smells, frequently bathroom breaks, accusations, knives, extreme fatigue, and ejection from an international flight, this is where I come into the mix. I was asked to come on board as a partner so Fred and Sonia could have one more person to help. And yes, I was fully aware of the events which transpired. Despite all the negativity, I wanted the opportunity as I never had the chance to study abroad while I was in college. If anything, missing out on chance to study abroad was the biggest regret from my undergraduate studies and soon became part of my mission as a Coordinator. I did not want students to miss out on such a wonderful chance to explore their world. After accepting the position, with no pay increase and no reimbursement for my travel expenses, I became part of a new and intense world.

For the third trip which took place in May of 2015, I was elected to be the Group Leader in charge of our 10-day program starting in London, England and leaving from Rome, Italy. Within a few short months, we had twelve travelers (five of which I recruited myself) and before we knew it, we were meeting at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport for our overnight flight to Heathrow. At this point, no one disclosed any bipolar disorder or use of any illegal drugs. Yet, I could not breathe any signs of relief just yet. As the time for

check-in approached, we were still missing one student. Without much time to spare, we decided to check-in for our flight while one of my team called her cell. Apparently, a family member passed away just days ago, and our distraught student was not certain if she was going to accompany us during this time of grief. Fortunately, at the urging of her family, she rushed to the airport with moments to spare before boarding.

Upon landing in London, a different student, Heather, experienced an allergic reaction to something on the plane which caused her face to be puffed up for days. Then, in Paris, one of our three male students, Roger, misplaced his pants in the hotel. Apparently, he was under the impression he had tossed them out of his hotel window in his sleep. Upon further investigation, we were informed his roommate, Daniel, made a joke perhaps they had accidentally been tossed out while our student was sleepwalking. The worst part, for me at least, was not the joke but was believed. Luckily, the pants were found safely stashed under some other clothes in their room. Now, Roger also had an issue with money. Though we instructed our travelers to budget about \$30 to \$50 a day while we were abroad, he budgeted \$50 for the entire trip. Nearing the point of starvation because of his lack of funds, my colleague and I were doing our best to offer him food and money whenever we could. It was later in Florence when Roger learned how to use an ATM for the first time. Score one point for life experience.

This same day in Florence, Hillary collapsed from exhaustion while we were on a walking tour. We agreed to play zones when it came to the walking tour, so I was in the front, Fred in the middle and Sonia bringing up the rear. I received a call on my cell from Sonia alerting me to the situation and instructed Fred to stay with the group before taking off running through the streets of Florence trying to find them. Sitting on the steps outside the Uffizi, I tried speaking with the student to identify the cause of her sudden illness. She described feeling nauseated, sensitivity to light, and smells. I said it sounded like a migraine to which she replied, "I hope I'm not pregnant." Oh boy.

After the Tour Director, Patti, arrived at the scene, she carted Sonia, the collapsed student, and Roger, her boyfriend, off to our hotel. I turned to retrace my steps and catch up with the rest my group still on our city tour. To think, so much already happened on my first journey abroad as a Study Abroad Coordinator and Group Leader. From the illnesses to the lack of sleep, misplaced pants to the mysterious package on our metro ride in Paris, and then getting lost in the Louvre before catching the overnight train to Milan without air conditioning and in a cart so small we thought we were in a prison (or worse, a coffin), I was ready to pack my bags and return home. As I darted through the crowded streets full of shoppers, locals, and tour groups such as ours, I had a startling thought: We still have Assisi and Rome to go.