Why in the World Go to Ireland?

The question came bluntly and succinctly from an African American professor I met at a NAFSA conference. She was teaching in a university in the Southern United States, and seeking out study abroad options for her students. Ireland was not top of her list. “Why in the world would our students want to go to Ireland?” she asked incredulously.

I explained to this professor the profound impact I witnessed every time African American students discovered that the civil rights movement in Ireland in 1968 was modeled on the American civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr., and the shared narrative of discrimination, segregation, and persecution. I told her about our Hawaiian, Native American, and Hispanic students who identified with the narrative of cultural subjugation and revival. County Donegal, the home base of Study Abroad Ireland, is an area within the Republic of Ireland renowned for its beauty and friendly people, but for decades it was affected by high levels of emigration, rural poverty, and proximity to the border of Northern Ireland. Ireland, I explained, with its cultural history of the grim, the grievous, and the grand, provides a template for all U.S. students, wherever their origin.

My interest in teaching U.S. students was inspired by a visit to Boston as a college student myself. I was asked to work at an Irish festival, and I was utterly stunned by the turnout of thousands of people to celebrate a culture that I absolutely took for granted. From then until now, I remain fascinated by hyphenated America—“Italian-American,” “African-American,” “Jewish-American,” “German-American,” “Irish-American,” etc.—and the potential these identities have to connect us to histories and cultures, but, more importantly, the potential these identities have to connect us to each other.

I will admit that when we first began programs for U.S. students in Ireland, we did have the Irish-American diaspora in mind. However, the more we engaged with faculty and students from the United States, and the more we witnessed the impact of Ireland and Irish culture on visiting students, the more we began to realize that Ireland could function as a global platform that could offer much more than an insight into a particular indigenous culture.
Ireland has had a difficult history, which includes colonization, the suppression of language and culture, famine, emigration, a cultural revival, a civil rights movement, a terrible and divisive conflict in Northern Ireland that thankfully moved into the current Peace Process, an economic boom and a subsequent recession, and a prioritizing of natural and environmental resources for future generations. We began to realize that the narrative of Ireland, past and present, provides our visiting students with much that is familiar, even if they know nothing about Ireland. One of our turning points came in 2006 when a group of students destined for another country could not travel because of safety concerns. We were asked to provide an alternative program. These students were of African American and Hispanic ethnicity, and we wondered what they would make of a visit to Ireland. We were astounded by their affinity with our narratives, their enjoyment of the Gaelic culture, and their rapport with the experiences of the Irish people, past and present. We, in turn, were enlightened by their cultural traditions and experiences, and so we began to rethink how we could adapt our programs to be more accessible to nontraditional visitors to Ireland.

We began to think about and teach Irish culture in a comparative manner. Rather than deal with specific cultural events, we began to search out the parallels between the Irish experience and those of our visitors. Nearly all of our students are descendants of immigrants from somewhere and we share narratives of struggle and success in re-establishing our identity in the United States. Through the lens of Irish culture, we can learn, discuss, and think about the past, the present, and the future, and with a focus relevant to the particular field of study of the students. In light of recent political events, it seems that these conversations and critical interrogations of identity and cultural affinity are more relevant than ever. Whatever their background, religion, ethnicity, or experience, Ireland provides a case study for students to step out of their immediate environment and investigate a small country that has had its own cultural and political challenges.

We have learned that study abroad opportunities are often least available to the students who would benefit the most from the experience. Ironically, the silver lining to Ireland’s gray cloud of history is that the areas most affected by conflict and emigration—particularly along the Atlantic Coast—are low-cost, very beautiful, and badly in need of visitors. Therefore, the possibilities of providing a program that could tick the boxes of “affordable, authentic, and accessible” were realized, and all within an English-speaking, American-friendly environment.

It became clear to us that the traditional model for study abroad programs had not just changed in terms of cost and time available, but in terms of the focus of study abroad trips. Business studies, criminal justice, civil rights, sustainability, environmental issues, sports management, conflict resolution, theatre studies, digital media, photography—these are just some of the more “modern” fields of study being chosen by students, and frequently, corresponding short-term study abroad experiences either did not exist or depended on a time-consuming and dedicated commitment from faculty to create one. We began to formulate a template of a short-term program in Ireland that would not only provide an interdisciplinary cultural and experiential immersion, touching on all of the essential basic elements of study abroad, but that could also be adapted to suit specific disciplines and deliver specific—as well as general—learning outcomes.

We have now delivered programs for students of business studies, marketing, technology, civil rights, social justice, criminal justice, sports, theatre studies, photography, politics, poetry, and arts. The same critical thinking and interrogative conversations apply, but our field trips and our pre-and post-trip projects are focused on an expanded and more global experience of the students’ own field of studies.
There were two other challenges in providing short-term programs for colleges, particularly new programs. One was the challenge of enrolling sufficient numbers to make the program viable; the second was to ensure some way of benefitting not just the individual students who travelled, but the U.S. institution as a whole.

The first of these we addressed in a practical way, and stumbled on further epiphanies. When colleges were beginning their recruitment programs, many asked if they could open up the programs to community members, faculty, or alumni who were interested in the travel. While these travelers would not necessarily be taking credits for doing the trip, their engagement often helped to subsidize or reduce the student fee. Secondly, we encouraged smaller groups to collaborate with other colleges so that the economies of scale that are available to larger groups could be extended, and that small groups of students would not be disappointingly let down if the target enrollment was not reached.

Both of these strategies have delivered unexpected and delightful results. By allowing alumni, nontraditional students, and community members to enroll in the programs, students enjoy an unusual social experience. We saw great friendships strike up across all age groups; the older participants enjoying the youthful energy of undergrads, and the younger students gaining much from the benevolence and kindness of their elders. The collaboration of colleges adds to the whole experience of travel—we have had colleges from North Carolina partner with Iowa, Hawaii partner with Michigan—and in these collaborations, students are not just learning about Irish culture, but also about the differences in their own country. It is a gentle way of recognizing differences among fellow Americans, and by doing so in Ireland, this process encourages critical reflection on the ties that bind, rather than those that are divisive.

The second challenge in providing positive study abroad opportunities is to ensure that study abroad is not simply a "boutique" experience for a select group. By engaging with the institution as a partner, we began to work with faculty in advance of the trip, visiting the college campus and inviting everyone (including nontraveling students) to come to introductory talks on Ireland and Irish culture. We create reading lists and resources that were available to all, and many students returned to create on-campus exhibitions, online travel blogs, and social media projects. We found that, post-program, students were very interested in further college participation, whether it was through language classes or workshops on global culture, diversity, or social engagement.

Another curiosity is the popularity of the Irish language, and our students enjoy having their name translated into its Irish form. Our
visit to Derry City, and the story of the civil rights movement, is one of those trips that renders the students almost speechless. The Bogside area of Derry is home to 12 large murals that tell the story of the civil rights movement, and the final mural features a dove and many shades of green and orange. The murals are a narrative of a history of violence that has concluded in a peace process that is inclusive of all.

A further delightful discovery in our development of short-term faculty-led trips is that the tentative and shy student is emboldened by the experience, and ready to take on further adventures that were previously considered terrifying. Ireland’s culture is familiar enough to be secure and different enough to be fascinating—but the big hurdles of acquiring a passport, taking a long international flight, and leaving home, family, and friends have already been tackled. Ireland is not only a platform, but also a trampoline from which the student bounces onward and further afield to explore the world.

An important aspect of all of these programs to Ireland is the impact on the Irish community to which the students travel. Our campus is in the county of Donegal, tucked up in the northwest of the Republic of Ireland, and adjacent to the six counties of Northern Ireland. Historically, political and economic circumstances and more have isolated this part of Ireland with high unemployment levels and migration to the urban areas of Ireland and beyond. The engagement of visitors from the United States provides very welcome business for all our service providers, local professionals, cultural amenities, artists, musicians, and adventure instructors. We are often asked if we can provide community service elements for the students, but in truth, the entire project of traveling to our location is in itself a community service, to the mutual benefit of all.

If one had an overall aspiration for our programs, it is to invigorate the concept of empathy. Our fundamental principle is that by stimulating conversations about our cultural and historical experiences, we will reinforce the idea that despite our differences in race, creed, or color, there is much more that connects us than divides us. We in Ireland, and particularly here in the border counties, have found a way past the ugliest of conflicts through a process of dialogue and the development of tolerance. We sincerely believe that we have learned hard lessons that are well worth sharing with others who face these challenges.

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