

Paradise and Paradox: A Reflective Case Study of a Short-Term, Sustainability-Themed, “Study Abroad” Program in Puerto Rico

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Abstract

This reflective case study explores the paradoxes inherent in developing a short-term, sustainability-themed, “study abroad” program to Puerto Rico for students enrolled at a research university in the continental United States. Travel to this U.S. territory provides a unique opportunity for students who are able to experience the island with its own history, culture, and language without having to acquire passports. The authors explore the development, assessment, and sustainability of such a course that is offered successively over a four year period, including outcomes, both expected and unexpected.

Keywords

study abroad; study away; sustainability; travel course; Puerto Rico

In 2017, a national poll indicated that 54% of Americans do not know that Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens (Dropp & Nyhan, 2017). The percentage was even lower for adults under 30, a demographic category that includes traditionally aged college students. Unfortunately, this is not the first time in history this beautiful island, located in the central Caribbean, has been misunderstood by others, especially foreigners who have never been there. The use of the term “foreigner” is intentional in the previous sentence. While Americans are not foreigners to Puerto Rico, in the sense that they are part of the same country, they are often perceived to be foreign in other ways, including language and culture. Our reflective case study, presented here, is illustrative of a host of apparent paradoxes that emerged when a pair of instructors decided to develop a short-

term, sustainability-themed, study “abroad” program to regularly bring groups of U.S. college students to the island paradise of Puerto Rico.

Puerto Rico both is and is not part of the United States. It is not a state. Rather, it is a territory or commonwealth, meaning that its citizens hold U.S. passports, serve in the U.S. military, and send (non-voting) representatives to Congress. They cannot, however, vote in U.S. elections and do not necessarily benefit from the same legal privileges (Duany & Pantojas-García, 2005). For the purposes of study abroad, the first item (passports) is among the most significant. U.S. students travelling to Puerto Rico do not require passports nor are they subject to any other conventional export controls because the travel is deemed to be within the United States. Such travel may not fall under the jurisdiction of many offices of global education or international programs, as it did not for this case study. Legally speaking, travelling to San Juan with a group of students is no different than travelling to, say, Cincinnati, Ohio or Atlanta, Georgia.

On the other hand, Puerto Rico both is and is not a separate country. The island has its own flag, laws, history, literature, and many other rich and distinctive traditions. Based on these, there have been periodic independence movements (whether from Spanish or U.S. oversight) throughout the colonial history of the island (Lecours & Vézina, 2017). Perhaps for these reasons as well, travel to Puerto Rico is still classified by many U.S. universities as “study abroad.” At our institution, for example, the global education office did include our trip under study abroad opportunities for the purposes of marketing and recruitment. The use of the term “study abroad” when applied to Puerto Rico may be indicative of the reasons why similar programs first emerged as a high-impact practice (HIP) starting in the 1980s (Kauffman & Kuh, 1984; Kuh, 2007). The opportunity to travel to a different country and experience a different culture directly was deemed to be an essential part of becoming a thoughtful global citizen, especially one equipped with appropriate cross-cultural skills, dispositions, and competencies (Hunter et al., 2006; Reilly & Senders, 2009; Stebleton et al., 2013). Theorists have suggested that the term “study abroad” be replaced with “study away” to reflect the fact that not all cross-cultural exchanges have to take place across borders, but in practice, “study abroad” remains the predominant term (Sobania & Braskamp, 2009).

The impetus for this “study abroad” program to Puerto Rico was similar to the indicators of a high-impact practice. One of the instructors had recently transitioned to academia from a career in international business, including extended stays in Puerto Rico as a pharmaceutical executive, and the other was herself of Puerto Rican heritage and taught Spanish language and culture. After meeting during a new faculty orientation program, the two decided to propose an extended trip to the island for students at a commuter campus of a large, research-intensive university located in the northeastern part of the United States. The campus primarily serves students from the surrounding area, which consists of a mixture of medium-sized cities and suburban communities with a predominantly blue-collar workforce. The region also has a significant number of Hispanic residents. The two professors believed that the opportunity for short-term travel had the potential for students to gain experiences outside of the region and expand their horizons by engaging with students (and others) whose economic, political, and cultural circumstances differed from their own.

Their request came at an opportune time. A recent revision of the general education curriculum emphasized integrative (i.e. interdisciplinary) learning, and there had been rising attention to sustainability issues from local businesses. The campus executive dean, an experienced world

traveler himself, had recognized the transformative potential of travel for these students even before the practice was elevated to high impact status. As an added bonus, he frequently recounted the story of how he met his wife of 50 plus years through a study abroad program in Italy. By 2017, he and that same wife were already making plans for his imminent retirement when the proposal for the Puerto Rico trip came across his desk. He told the pair of instructors that he was inclined to support the proposal, but that the students would need to be “more than just tourists.” In other words, there would need to be a curriculum, an articulated set of learning outcomes, and opportunities for the students to engage in regular reflection on their experience.

The dean’s recommendations were in-line with best practices, particularly the emphasis on reflection (Biber, 2020; Reilly & Senders, 2009). That said, research on the impact of study abroad on student success has led to more mixed results than other HIPs, with gains often noted as modest (Kauffman & Kuh, 1984; Stebleton et al., 2013), especially in the case of shorter term (i.e. not semester long) programs (Ballantyne et al., 2012; Ritz, 2011; Tarrant & Lyons, 2012). Scholars have noted that these outcomes could be strengthened through connection with other curricular and co-curricular programs (Biber, 2020; Di Maggio, 2019).

In an effort to embed the Puerto Rican experience across the curriculum, the two instructors chose not to make the course about the conventional topic of language and culture directly (Moreno-Lopez et al., 2009), but rather to focus on an interdisciplinary theme, sustainability, a choice which served several purposes (Dvorak et al., 2011). The topic was believed to be popular with and relevant to Penn State students. It was an interest of businesses in the community surrounding the campus. Perhaps most importantly, it mattered to people in Puerto Rico. At the time, the island was searching for viable economic opportunities that could offset their reliance on the tourism trade, which was subject to periodic and unpredictable fluctuations, largely because of hurricanes and other natural disasters. Agriculture, which had a longstanding history on the island, was a possibility but only if they could avoid dangers like soil depletion that had plagued the sector in the past. For the initial iteration of the course, the instructors partnered with a Biology faculty member who could speak to the scientific factors related to high-end coffee-growing (the proposed alternative cash crop). She also travelled to Puerto Rico with the first cohort.

The instructors then turned toward the global programs office for guidance on logistics but were disappointed to learn that they could not work through existing networks, as these focused on travel outside of the United States. Instead, the instructors had to start building relationships in Puerto Rico themselves, a process which began with a cold call to a business faculty member at the main campus of University of Puerto Rico (UPR) in Rio Piedras. Dr. Jorge Ortiz, a complete stranger, was sufficiently encouraging in his response to the initial inquiry. The two instructors worked through him to establish what are now programmatic mainstays—joint sessions with Penn State and UPR students and an excursion to the island of Culebra, where an international NGO was (and still is) actively working on sustainability issues. For the first iteration of the course, the students also visited a second UPR campus, Utuado, which focused on sustainable agriculture, with particular attention to Indigenous practices that pre-dated European colonization. Unfortunately, the group was not able to return to this site on subsequent visits, as the entire academic complex was nearly wiped out, tragically and somewhat ironically, by Hurricane Maria the following fall.

Initially, these excursions were being planned for early May, following the end of the regular spring semester at Penn State but while UPR was still in session. The assumption was that more students might be available in May, as the course would not conflict with regular semester-long instruction. In addition, May has historically posted the least number of hurricanes. The instructors learned, however, that travel during the summer can constitute a significant economic hardship, as the course costs cannot be absorbed into full-time rates like they can be in the regular fall or spring semester. Second choice was the period between the fall and spring semesters when the island weather would be a welcome contrast to cold and snow in eastern Pennsylvania. University administrators, however, were unable to resolve the question of whether the tuition for the course would be covered by fall or spring. That left spring break as the third option. March was chosen with some reluctance, as there were many opportunities being offered to compete for the students' attention, and because there was a possibility of overlapping schedules with UPR, meaning that it was possible the Penn State students would be on the UPR campus when the UPR students were not. The choice would later prove to have momentous consequences.

Another decision to be worked out was determination of cost. The global programs office gave the instructors some advice, but they were largely on our own, both in terms of setting the price and calculating the financial risks. Penn State had no prior history of student travel to the island, so the instructors contacted two other universities with long-standing programs. These bore little resemblance to the structure and duration of our program, so benchmarking was not possible. That said, they experienced their first glimmer of benchmarking when they were invited to a study abroad fair in October. It was quickly apparent that the Puerto Rican program was quite a bargain compared to all others in the room. Not only did it have the advantage of shorter travel time, especially when compared to destinations in Europe and Asia, but it also gained additional cost advantages by not working through third parties on logistics and not having to contend with the overhead related to travel outside of the United States (Doyle et al., 2010). For subsequent iterations, the costs were reduced even further, largely a consequence of stronger local relationships and early bookings with the hotel and airlines.

The final challenge was recruitment. Both of the instructors woke up more than once in the middle of the night, worried that all of their hard work to establish the program may have been in vain. The student body at Penn State had a number of risk factors identified by scholars as potential barriers to participation, including relatively high percentages of first-generation, adult, and/or international students (Doyle, 2010; Lörz et al., 2016). In the fall of 2016, they began extensive recruitment efforts. It should be noted that recruitment on a small campus with roughly 1,000 students has some advantages. Nearly all face to face classes at the Lehigh Valley campus of Penn State take place in the same building, making it easier to post flyers. The students have multiple opportunities to form close relationships with each other, which facilitates word of mouth dissemination. There were also three participating faculty members, in three different departments, who could talk it up in their classes and encourage their colleagues to do the same.

As it turns out, there was no need to worry. The twenty-five student quota was filled before Thanksgiving. In subsequent years, the instructors actually set a maximum of sixteen participants and began putting additional applicants on a waiting list. The 2018 trip was, unfortunately, cancelled because of Hurricane Maria. The 2019 trip took place with 16 students. By the third iteration in 2020, 16 Penn State-Lehigh Valley students were accepted. Word about the program

had spread to another Penn State campus that did not have as many study abroad opportunities, so three additional seats were opened up for their students.

Prior to their trip, the students participate in a series of three short workshops intended to prepare them to engage across cultures, but there were many aspects of the experience that proved to be unexpected. According to their daily logs (recorded on their cell phones using WordPress), the students arrived in this island paradise looking forward to experiencing a different culture. Most assume that the culture of Puerto Rico is primarily Hispanic, strongly influenced by the Spanish colonizers. While the Spanish influence is clearly evidence, the students also came to appreciate the mixing of cultures, particularly the presence of Indigenous influences. This appreciation can appear to be superficial (e.g., the use of indigenous place names), but the focus of the course, sustainability, also intersects with deeper, diverse epistemologies of the natural world.

After the first iteration of the course, the instructors chose to drop the number of credits for the course (from 3 to 1) to further lower the barriers to participation. This also necessitated a modification of the curriculum. Rather than focusing on a single sustainability question (such as the feasibility of growing coffee), the curriculum instead paired excursions and activities with a range of sustainability practices. On the first day, for example, students visited the El Yunque rainforest and discussion focused on sustainable ecosystems. A snorkeling excursion through a coral reef was followed by a walk down the Seven Seas beach, during which time the students collected litter and considered questions of waste management. The instructors adopted a “observe, reflect, write” model in which students were provided with opportunities to practice connecting their daily experiences to larger environmental themes. As one student commented, *“During a typical family vacation, we can sometimes get lost in the man-made beauty of the resorts we stay at and forget to embrace the natural beauty of the world.”* Over the course of their visit, the students articulated a process by which they began to reconcile, even integrate, what they were learning with long-term changes in practice. As one student commented, *“I know that I am going to start thinking about the consequences of my actions.”* Another student went so far as to change his major to environmental engineering and sustainability management and secure an internship working with an NGO in Puerto Rico.

There was considerable evidence from the daily logs, too, of students wrestling with issues of intersectionality, of both themselves and the people they encountered. This was especially evident after a day-long joint session on sustainability in which they worked in teams with local university students. Penn State students found common ground with their counterparts through shared interests, such as wildlife conservation, and challenges, such as finding resources in the library. In one memorable case, a student of Puerto Rican heritage found himself quite apprehensive about visiting the place of which he had heard so many stories (Terenishi, 2012). He and his siblings had never been able to travel to the island because of financial constraints, and the prospect of seeing this almost (in his mind) mythical place turned out to feel quite overwhelming. By the end of the trip, however, he wrote about gaining a profound sense of belonging. He stated that this was a feeling that he had never had back in Pennsylvania, where he had been born and raised, leading him to consider how his relationships might change when he returned.

The name Puerto Rico itself means “rich port” in Spanish, but this, too, is somewhat paradoxical. The island is relatively well off compared to its neighbors in the Caribbean, but not when compared

to the rest of the United States. This rich port has a significantly higher percentage of households living below the poverty line, as well as higher unemployment and larger debts compared to U.S. averages. Most of the Penn State students did not come from wealthy backgrounds, but confrontation with evidence of economic disparities did lead to conversations, sometimes uncomfortable ones, around privilege, positionality, and reciprocity. For example, the students stay in a resort hotel with many amenities, including high security, a pool, and comfortable rooms, which at first they find delightful. Over time, however, some begin to question their privilege and the extent to which their patronage was helpful or harmful to the island economy and its long-term environmental sustainability. Especially after meeting with the other UPR students in their joint sessions, the Penn State students start to realize that this trip was not just an experiencing happening to (and for) them, but rather they were both shaping and being shaped by their interactions with the people around them.

There are more stories that could be told, but we (the researchers) suggest that this case study is paradoxical on multiple levels. When we first developed the research design for the study, we had three goals. We wanted to provide information about how the project developed, which we thought could be useful to others seeking to organize similar projects. We wanted to contribute to a growing body of evidence about the benefits of short-term study away programs. Finally, we wanted to encourage others to consider bringing students to Puerto Rico. In the final paradox, we both did and did not accomplish what we had set out to do.

We gained IRB-approval in February for a study that contributed to a body of knowledge about student learning in short-term study abroad/away programs (Biber, 2020; Mapp, 2012; Ritz, 2011; Tarrant & Lyons, 2012). The study was to examine student artifacts, including their daily logs and videos, to trace their development, possibly even transformation, through the experience. What we found in the initial, largely superficial, analysis is generally what you might expect to find. There was evidence that students were connecting what they learned to other courses or future careers and that students seemed to become more adept at cultural humility, recognizing what they did not know as much as what they did. They generally gained a deeper appreciation for people in circumstances different than their own. All to various degrees and adapted to the respective circumstances of the individual students, of course. These outcomes are based on a relatively small sample and are not terribly surprising. Rather, they serve largely to confirm prior beliefs that short-term study away programs can have similar benefits to analogous study abroad modalities, perhaps with a little less fuss and bother on the part of the organizers. Overall, our intention was to make a rather modest contribution to the study abroad literature (Cruz & Parker, 2018; Lewin, 2010).

That is, however, not the paper we ultimately chose to write. This last trip took place over spring break in March of 2020. In fact, this was the only travel trip taken by any Penn State student that spring, and the last any Penn State student will take for the foreseeable future. The organizers waited anxiously for the final approval for the trip, which came only days before departure. Two other campus-based trips, an honors student trip to Italy and healthcare-related trip to Denmark, had been cancelled weeks before. Even though the university offered refunds, only one student opted out, and not because of the virus, but because she had broken her foot and her doctor would not clear her to fly. Little did they know that were among the last regular flights to leave for Puerto Rico. The university announced that it would be moving to remote teaching the Wednesday of the week the group was in Puerto Rico.

Only no one in this group, including the instructors, knew about any of that. The students' final videos are full of plans for the future, expectations for graduation, ideas about community organization, or even simply the anticipation of sharing their adventures with friends and family. It is heart breaking to watch these last artifacts of the "before-time," knowing that these students not only were transformed through their study away experience, but they also came back to a world that had completely transformed itself in their absence. We have no evidence about what it was like for them when they returned, and it is difficult even to imagine what their respective experiences have been like.

Puerto Rico declared a state of emergency the week after the students left, and island residents went required to shelter in place two days later. Among the first positive cases was a group of local students (and teachers) returning from a trip to Mexico. By the early summer, Puerto Rico was under a state of emergency and on a level 3 travel advisory for essential travel only. Puerto Rican universities moved to remote instruction approximately a week after Penn State. Although cases numbers did not appear significantly higher than other places in the United States, the island lacks the medical capacity to manage pandemic-level infection rates. Initial plans to re-open for tourists in July were delayed until August and recently were delayed again through September. The island has, to date, never completely closed its borders to U.S. citizens, but under current conditions, it is safe to assume that a group of students would not be considered essential.

The Puerto Rican economy, already badly shaken by Hurricane Maria, a series of earthquakes, civil bankruptcy, persistent infrastructure issues, and unfavorable changes in U.S. tax law, now has to recover from extended business closures and the loss of the tourist trade at the peak of the season. As of this writing, unemployment has already reached record levels. When the island is able to fully re-open, it seems unlikely that residents will be able to return to any semblance what had been their normal lives, so their world, too, has been transformed in ways that are difficult to imagine.

The goals of our original project not only no longer seem relevant, but they seem as if they were developed in a past far more distant than less than a year ago. For most of Penn State's current students, the prospect of study abroad, or even study away in most cases, may not be an option as part of their undergraduate experience. Puerto Rico's political future is unclear, and the island will be challenged to emerge from these repeated economic blows as the same vibrant paradise it had been. In the final irony, it would appear that this sustainability-themed experience may not itself be sustainable. This case study, then, became primarily an exercise in reflection, or looking back on how the world once was, rather than looking forward to where this research might go.

It can, however, also be a case for resiliency, because there is cause for hope. The paradoxical question of "How can you do study abroad without travel?" has proven to be a source of considerable inspiration regarding the sustainability of this high-impact practice. It has led to numerous technical innovations, such as virtual and augmented reality simulations, but also to deeper conversations about why we travel and what we aspire for our students to become through their interactions with other peoples and places. The global quarantine has served as a catalyst for educators to envision ways in which students "abroad" are not just tourists, or even learners, but rather co-creators of the brave, new, post-pandemic world which we are all preparing to inhabit.

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