

Vassar Student Association Council
Agenda for December 6, 2009

Time: 7:00pm

Location: College Center 223

“Courage is grace under pressure.”

--Ernest Hemingway

Call to Order

Attendance _____ Operations

Consent Agenda

Approval of the Minutes from 11/29

Announcements

Senior Class Gift

Special Guests: Committee on Inclusion and Excellence

Lisa Collins, Professor of Art History

Katie Hite, Professor of Political Science

Exec Board Reports

President

Operations

Admin Review: JYA _____ Student Life

Certification of Vassar Haiti Project _____ Activities

Open Discussion _____ Anyone

Adjourn

**Vassar Student Association
Administrative Review, Fall 2009
Office of International Programs**

This fall, the Vassar Student Association (VSA) Council focused its biannual Administrative Review on the Office of International Programs. Administrative Reviews allow the student government a regular chance to consider the role of different offices on campus, and to make policy suggestions from the students' point of view.

In an increasingly globalized world, we see an obvious and increasing need for accessible and robust international programs. Among the myriad of skills required of graduates, few are more compelling than the ability to live and function productively outside of one's own culture. This can come in many forms, and entails overcoming countless barriers—linguistic, social, economic, and geographic, to name only a few. Far from being an additional “bonus,” we see international travel as an integral part of the Vassar educational experience. We are proud that so many Vassar students choose to study abroad, particularly during their junior years. About 43% of students undertake international study for one or more semesters, a number that roughly tracks Vassar's peer group. In the coming years, we would like to become a leader in this area, encouraging a greater proportion of our student body to embrace international travel and experience a deep sense of internationality.

Overall, seniors who went aboard last year report that their travel was among the most outstanding, memorable, and life-changing experiences of their Vassar education. Still, many expressed some concerns about the study abroad process, both in terms of the approval and advising process. In this review, we seek to outline some of those concerns to improve this core component of the College's educational mission. We will then offer some constructive suggestions for moving forward. We mean these only as reflections of student concern, and certainly not as personal attacks on the Office's thoughtful and committed staff.

Accessibility and Attitude: By far, the most common concern of students is the accessibility, broadly defined, of the International Programs Office. “Their office hours are too limited,” said one student. “I had trouble even getting in the door. Sometimes the lights were on but the door was locked in the middle of the day, and when I knocked, I was rudely shooed away.” Once getting through the door, many students do report getting sound advice. “[Ms. Correll] definitely had many brochures and knew about past students' experiences,” said one. But others were concerned with the tone of some encounters. “I felt like I was being yelled at for not already knowing the established procedures as soon as I walked in,” said another student. “[The staff] didn't seem willing to sit down and have a broad conversation about my interests and goals. It was all about filling out their stupid forms and picking my top choices. I felt rushed and largely unsupported.”

Connection to Vassar's Advising Network: There seems to be little or no

connection between Vassar's network of academic advisers and the Office of International Programs. We feel that pre-major and major advisers should catalyze student interest in studying abroad from their first moments on campus. Planning to leave the country should be a standard aspect of conversations with academic advisers. Currently, most of these faculty members seem to know very, very little about study abroad programs and next to nothing about the process of approval for study abroad.

Roles of Staff: A surprising number of current seniors recall it being excessively difficult to speak with the Office's Director, Susan Correll. They feel as if the Administrative Specialist, Susan Stephens, was the one giving them information on programs and services. "I felt as if I was being kept from [Ms. Correll]. I would ask to make an appointment with her, and [Ms. Stephens] would ask me "why" and attempt to answer my questions herself. And then I felt awkward continuing to pursue an appointment with the director." While students certainly value the work of Ms. Stephens, there seems to be a strong desire to speak with Ms. Correll on matters of substance. As the professional international study adviser, she seems to have a far greater knowledge of the academic and social environments of the various abroad programs, and thus is a valuable person for students to meet with. For technical matters (dates, forms, scheduling etc.), students feel comfortable with the guidance of Ms. Stephens.

Approval Process: Another near-unanimous concern was the lengthy process of "approval" for studying abroad. The most common complaint revolved around the bureaucracy—the idea that one had to "apply" for permission to apply to an actual program. Many also thought the process of choosing three programs was useless as well, since many felt too constrained by that early date, or wished to change their mind later. "The whole thing seems incredibly unnecessary," said one student. "All they need to do is make sure I'm a good student with a solid record. They don't need an essay on what I hope to gain from the experience. What a complete waste of time. Everyone hopes to gain basically the same things from a JYA program. Do people really need to sit around considering that information? Just let us apply to programs ourselves."

Based on these four common concerns, the VSA recommends the following for consideration by the Dean of the College, Dean of the Faculty, and Director of International Programs:

The Office of International Programs should exist under the Dean of the Faculty rather than the Dean of the College. We feel that this shift would allow far better communication with faculty in their capacities as advisers and teachers. Faculty should have regular communication with the Office, exchanging ideas about programs that could complement their coursework. The current structure markets study abroad as academic, but the College makes no connections (in most cases) between students' academic lives at Vassar and their academic lives at their host institutions abroad. The VSA would like to see each department work with the Office of International Programs to generate common lists of relevant programs for their majors. Departments should then present this information—through faculty advising, coursework, and majors

committees—to students. Too often, we feel, faculty are left out of the process entirely. These obvious synergies would happen more naturally by moving the office under the Dean of the Faculty.

The Office of International Programs should expand its office hours, particularly for the Director. Based on student feedback, we believe that the Office should consider expanding its drop-in office hours. The Office of Career Development, although their staff is certainly greater, has a wonderful system whereby students can either schedule an extended meeting or “drop-in” for a quick question or consultation. The Office of International Programs should consider following their example. Additionally, students *strongly* desire direct communication with Ms. Correll. Too often, we have found that students are literally prevented from speaking directly with her, or are put in positions where they feel uncomfortable scheduling a meeting with her. This certainly should not be the case. Those who can reach her find her extraordinarily helpful—but those who cannot feel frustrated. The consensus, it seems, is that there needs to be a clearer delineation between the role of the Office’s Director and its administrative support staff. Perhaps a more direct method of scheduling an appointment with Ms. Correll would alleviate some of the concerns around this matter.

The Office of International Programs, in conjunction with the Dean of the Faculty and the Committee on Leaves and Privileges, should reconsider its unwieldy approval process. We feel very strongly that the current system of approval for study abroad wastes an incredible amount of time for students, administrators, and faculty on the Committee on Leaves and Privileges. For all but 2 or 3 students each year, approval is essentially guaranteed. The Office’s application is cumbersome, and the comments of the Committee on Leaves and Privileges (which lightly encourage some students to take more coursework or consider certain programs) are totally non-binding and almost always ignored. We are left with the simple question: why bother? Why have an elaborate approval process with frustrating deadlines and essays, delaying students from simply applying directly to the actual programs? A formulaic approach would be a far more efficient way of determining study abroad eligibility. For example: “All Vassar students are eligible to spend a semester abroad at a foreign institution if a) their GPA exceeds a 3.2, b) their student records are free from any serious breaches of conduct, and c) they have had conversations (and acquired signatures) from the Director of International Programs and their major or pre-major adviser.” This system would concentrate approval and advising on the appropriate individuals—the Director and the student’s adviser—rather than on a joint committee.

The VSA appreciates the opportunity to evaluate campus offices, particularly one so centrally tied to the core values of the College. We sincerely hope that the points made in this review can become springboard for further discussion and catalysts for change. If there are any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Institute of International Education, "Annual Report," October 2009. Vassar's proportion of students studying abroad at some point during their academic careers is about on par with our traditional group of 21 peer colleges (about 2% lower than the mean).