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Coronavirus and Study Abroad: A Detailed Account of the Suspension of a Program

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Abstract

The University of Dallas Rome program, in the face of growing health and safety concerns, suspended its operations due to the accelerating COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020. This brief article reflects on actions taken in the days and weeks leading up to the suspension of all activities and closes with a series of lessons learned and reflection questions. While universities and their study abroad programs are still responding to COVID-19 challenges, institutional leaders can learn a great deal from the experience and in preparation for future challenges. This article's reflections and open-ended questions seek to promote greater discussion and planning for those future challenges.

Abstract in Italian

Il programma di Roma dell'Università di Dallas, di fronte alle crescenti preoccupazioni per la salute e la sicurezza, ha sospeso le sue operazioni a causa dell'accelerazione della pandemia di COVID-19 nel marzo del 2020. Questo breve articolo riflette sulle azioni intraprese nei giorni e nelle settimane precedenti alla sospensione di tutte le attività e si chiude con una serie di lezioni apprese e domande di riflessione. Mentre le università e i loro programmi di studio

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all'estero stanno ancora rispondendo alle sfide del COVID-19, i leader istituzionali possono imparare molto da questa esperienza in preparazione delle sfide future. Le riflessioni e le domande aperte di questo articolo cercano di promuovere una maggiore discussione e pianificazione per queste sfide future.

Keywords:

International education, Study abroad, Italy, COVID-19, Crisis response, Program operations

Introduction¹

As my wife and I disembarked our Istanbul-to-Rome flight, I noticed with some confusion the presence of a police escort. This confusion grew into concern when I turned on my phone and noted missed calls from my boss, a residence coordinator, and a handful of emails between my University's administration. It was Sunday, February 23, and Coronavirus (COVID-19) was spreading in Italy.

The two weeks that followed were a flurry of activity and difficult decisions. As the Director of Student Affairs, I work on the administration team with the Dean and Director of the Rome Program, and I manage a student affairs staff that coordinates student and residence life, program travel, health services, and judicial affairs. During our program's Coronavirus response, my primary role was to work between university administration and students to ensure students' safety and assist with student transitions from campus.

Ultimately, our program decided to close our study abroad campus and send students back to the United States. As I recount these weeks, choices made, and lessons learned, I hope our experience conveys practical advice to other programs and universities responding to the Coronavirus outbreak. Though other universities might take different measures, our program decided to release students back to the United States to continue their education remotely.

¹ Author's note: unless otherwise stated, I will use the informal "we" to describe action taken by a wide-range of University of Dallas personnel. Everyone from permanent Rome campus staffers, student affairs personnel, the Dean and Director of our Rome Campus, and home campus administration were essential actors in this two-week push to safely send students back to the United States.

My hope is that the experiences detailed and questions raised might help other programs prepare for similar challenges.

The University of Dallas is a liberal arts university with a robust business school and a Roman Catholic identity. A typical semester on our Eugene Constantine “Due Santi” Rome campus consists of three class trips in Italy and Greece, approximately three weeks of independent travel for students, and numerous site visits for 100+ students over 16 weeks.

Immediate Response (Days 1-2)

Outbreak in Northern Italy Accelerates and Italian Government Takes Measures to Ban Travel in Affected Areas:

Students were returning from an independent travel weekend as news of the Coronavirus outbreak in Northern Italy developed. Our immediate concern was to ensure the safety and security of our students and to share their status with concerned parents and loved ones. On the afternoon of February 23, we screened all students by checking everyone for a fever, recording their temperature, and noting their travel destinations for the last three weeks. We ordinarily ask our students to complete optional “travel plans” forms noting their travel groups, destinations, and duration, in case of emergency. Any students who had risk of exposure in Northern Italy were placed into separate rooms and asked to wear FFP2/V (these have a different name in USA) masks outside of their personal living quarters.

We did not immediately cancel classes or suspend meal service, but we did cancel all off-campus extracurricular activities, excluding immigration appointments. Students in semi-quarantine could attend classes, but we asked them to eat their meals separately. During our weekly all-campus meeting, we reiterated safety concerns, shared best practices from medical professionals for maintaining wellness, and distributed masks to concerned students. Our Dean and Director also issued a statement to university administration, students, and parents, describing our immediate plan of action and contingencies if the virus continued to spread. Our Dean and Director also ordered our meal service provider to stock 14 days’ worth of food and wine. We made a full count of available FFP2/V masks, and with the uncertain future of the semester looming, we offered additional counseling services to students.

On Monday, February 24, we asked our campus doctor, a local Italian general practitioner, to screen all of the semi-quarantined students. Thankfully, none of our semi-quarantined students presented any symptoms and the doctor provided us with a declaration of each student's status. By Tuesday, February 25, the majority of our semi-quarantined students reached the end of the 14 day incubation period and, due to their lack of symptoms, we released them from quarantine.

Secondary Response (Days 2-6)

Lazio Passes Emergency Law Banning Educational Travel

With the assurance that our students were safe and secure on campus, our focus shifted to adjusting our weekly schedule and contingency planning. Emergency Italian laws forbid nonessential travel in the affected northern areas, but given our location in the region of Lazio – 13 miles outside the center of Rome – we felt confident that we could attempt our usual 10-day trip to Greece. We planned to depart on March 1, but during the week Lazio ratified laws forbidding educational travel. Scrapping the Greece trip, a major educational component and student highlight of the semester, was a difficult blow for our students. In this challenging situation, our Dean and Director chose to be completely open and transparent with the students. To our surprise, the students responded with poise and maturity. Four students or 4% of our spring 2020 class, after consultation with their parents, decided to return home and complete classes remotely. The majority decided to stay, even after we announced that we could not guarantee future travel opportunities. We adjusted our semester calendar to allow for a Greece trip after the ban was lifted and moved academic work forward in the schedule. After this second round of planning was completed and approved by university administration, we announced the plan to students and emailed it to their parents and loved ones.

The response from parents and families was mixed. Some individuals called upon the university to immediately send the students back to the United States, while others seemed surprised that we would even consider suspending travel or the semester as a whole. Throughout this two-week cycle of communication, our plans fluctuated with the acceleration of positive COVID-19 cases and changes to Italian law. Our program maintained clear channels of communication, thanks to a committed study abroad office at our home campus. This office fielded parents' calls and emails, and distributed our Dean and

Director's status reports to parents and concerned parties. From February 23 to March 2 our Dean and Director sent five status or planning emails to parents and students, and during this time we also held four all-community meetings with students. Moreover, our program came to rely on third-party relationships to gain further information. We contacted and/or received information from study abroad associations such as the Association of American College and University Programs in Italy and the Forum on Education Abroad, local medical professionals, and US governmental resources so that we could better inform our students and their families in the United States. Thankfully, we have a talented staff at our home campus that organizes cohorts, advertises programming, assists with immigration, and communicates on behalf of the program. These individuals fielded significant parental concerns during this period and synthesized information for a response by the Dean and Director.

Program Suspension (Days 7-13)

Outbreak in Northern Italy Accelerates and Italian Government Takes Measures to Ban Travel in Affected Areas:

This secondary plan came to a definite conclusion between February 28 and March 1. A number of similar study abroad programs in Rome – programs with strong enrollment and significant histories in Rome – started to close as we continued communication with university administration. Additionally, the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention decided to issue a level 3 travel health notice. There were continued concerns that Italy and the United States might further restrict travel. These factors made it clear that it was necessary to send our students back to the United States. Late in the evening on March 1, our Dean and Director, in conjunction with the University of Dallas' President, Executive Vice President, and Board of Trustees, decided to suspend our program. Students were informed via email at 6:00am on March 2, and all students were invited to a campus-community meeting at 11:00am to discuss the decision and their exit from campus.

Our student exit and continuation plan had several components. While not exhaustive, this is a breakdown of the major items.

- We announced our suspension decision to students via email and at an all-campus meeting. Again, the students responded with astounding maturity. One student even thanked our Dean and Director for his work

throughout the situation, which was one of the most heartwarming moments in my career in education.

- With student consent, we emailed parents about this final outcome.
- Our President issued a statement to the entire university community.
- Our Provost's Office connected faculty with online learning staff to set up remote classes.
- Student Affairs staff expanded counseling hours with our local mental health professional.
- Our home-campus study abroad office worked with our travel agency to rebook student flights and instruct parents on how to help get their children home.
- Program administration began campus checkout procedures and instructed students to self-quarantine when they returned home.
- Our students responded to local media requests and gave interviews about the evolving situation.

The turmoil that began on February 23 concluded for us on March 6, as the few remaining spring 2020 students departed campus shortly after 8:00am. We instructed our students to return home to their permanent addresses, and almost 90% did. Against university counsel, a few chose to remain in Europe but exited Italy. Remote classes began on March 9 with 100% student participation, and we are confident that no students will lose academic progress due to the program suspension. Even with the loss of academic travel, our faculty are using different resources, such as professional productions of Shakespeare, to supplement lectures and coursework. In hindsight, and with respect to our unique program and students, governmental restrictions, and the spread of COVID-19 confirmed the prudence of our decision to send students home.

Future Plans (Summer-Fall 2020)

Valuable Lessons Learned

Our program and university learned some valuable lessons as Coronavirus expanded in Italy and we decided to suspend our spring 2020 program. There is no substitute for clear and transparent communication with students; by trusting the students to respond maturely and with their own best

interests in mind, we were rewarded for our candor. Secondly, it is crucial to have access to local resources, be they medical, legal, or educational to lean on with questions and concerns. Beyond this, strong relationships between a study abroad and home campus can help with the division of duties necessary to ensure student safety. Lastly and where possible, contingency plans and preparation can save valuable time and resources when suddenly faced with a crisis.

On a personal note, I struggled with sending the students home. What is a university without its students? The confusion and apprehension I felt deplaning on February 23 evolved into sadness, guilt, and ultimately acceptance that this was the correct course of action. If our primary purpose as educators is to educate and serve students, then we owe it to them to be prepared for crises and resolutely respond with their best interests at heart.

As I write this reflection in mid-March, the administration of the University of Dallas is still responding to the evolving COVID-19 outbreak in the United States and making decisions about its Rome Program. To be completely honest, we, as a study abroad campus faculty and staff, are not sure what to expect. Discussions about the possibility of summer and fall programming are ongoing, and we have been informed that a decision will be made soon. In Rome, we have transitioned to remote classes, and as a student affairs staff we are nearing the end of our campus checkout procedures, which includes everything from renouncing student residency applications to cleaning the residence hall. On March 11, the Italian government, through an executive decree, ordered the suspension of all activities of organizations not indispensable to production until March 25. Upon consultation with our labor consultant, we immediately suspended our operations. All local Italian staff, except those working on agricultural production in our vineyard, was sent home for two weeks. Our American faculty remains on campus teaching their remote classes. On March 16, our home campus in Irving, TX announced an extension of spring break and transition to several weeks of online classes that extend into mid-April.

Faced with similar circumstances, the following questions are foundational in assessing challenges and responding appropriately. My hope is that these questions might spark discussion among universities and their staff.

- How effective is a semi-quarantine of students? Given the size of a residence hall, should universities plan for situations wherein they may

need to quarantine large groups of students? Do you rely on a third party for assistance? Do you have a plan for a medical evacuation of campus?

- Do your students and their loved ones understand that time abroad means complying with international laws? Are students and parents prepared to accept the consequences of an international decree?
- Do your students travel to-and-from their study abroad campus on group or university-coordinated bookings? If not, do you have a plan to quickly and efficiently rebook their travel in case of emergency? If not, do you have procedures in place to require your students to return to their permanent address in the United States? Do your procedures discourage or prevent students from engaging in personal travel if your program is suspended?
- Does your program account for or record personal student travel plans during leisure time? If not, do you have a plan to quickly locate all of your students in case of emergency?
- Do you have a plan in place for local staff and faculty? Are you familiar with local laws that affect what your institution or organization is required to do with regard to locally contracted staff, faculty, home stay families or other forms of accommodation, and other third-party providers?
- Do you have a plan in place to trigger certain decisions, such as returning students if the CDC or U.S. State Department declares a Level 3 or 4 travel advisory?
- Does your institution or organization have in place a refund or cancellation policy? A plan to ensure the continuation of classes? A plan for covering material that would be lost due to the cancellation of excursions?

Conclusion

There is much room for ongoing reflection on the COVID-19 pandemic and its influence on study abroad programs. Utilizing the University of Dallas Rome Program as a case study, it is clear that there is room for greater reflection on lessons learned and planning for future crises.

Author Biography

Benjamin Gibbs currently serves as Special Assistant to the President at the University of Dallas and is a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Austin. Prior to his role in the President's Office at the University of Dallas, Gibbs was the Director of Student Affairs for the Eugene Constantin Rome Campus at the University of Dallas. In his doctoral work, Gibbs's research focuses on presidential leadership and communications.