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Should Faculty be Allowed to Volunteer Time to Help Students Study Abroad?

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Why study abroad? Isn't it just an excuse to have fun and drink beer while getting college credit? In my world, absolutely not!

Pushing students to leave their comfort zones and explore the world is so essential to the learning process that many small, private liberal arts colleges have participation rates that exceed 90 percent. While large, public institutions like UCF may never be able to boast such numbers, study abroad is an amazing opportunity for those able to swing the time and finances.

Internationalization is hugely important on a student's resume and so relevant in how people view themselves and the world around them. I wish there were more scholarships or other ways to double, triple and eventually reach 90 percent UCF participation in study abroad.

Again, why study abroad? If there was one undergraduate experience that I would say was life-changing – it was my study-abroad experience.

My career goal all came into focus my sophomore year during the first dive I made on a six-week course that took me straight from the snow in Lewiston, Maine, to the turquoise waters of San Salvador Island in the Bahamas. I am now a marine biologist and I love what I do.

I vividly remember this first tropical dive and many additional dives, lectures and projects completed for this course. I also remember eating my first conch fritter, seeing my first hammerhead shark, the professor allowing me, and only me, to use his very expensive underwater camera, and seeing intact, massive fossil brain corals completely out of the water, documenting that sea levels have changed dramatically over the millennia.

Many of my colleagues around the country have similar love stories with their study-abroad experiences. Some of those who are now college faculty members help carry the torch by running their own study-abroad courses.

My UCF tropical marine biology class goes to Roatan, Honduras, for one week every other summer. I picked the safest location I could find for divers that would allow us to have a short, but extremely intense, underwater experience.

Of course, the expenses add up. I have looked at possible other venues, and determined this is the best place for my class. However, I have no control over the costs for flights or costs for running the course through Roatan Institute of Marine Sciences. It is one inclusive fee for food, lodging, lab fees and diving.

If I sign up 11 students, then my costs are covered by the institute. Student fees cover my flight cost, but I have never requested salary for this adventure. Nor am I interested in receiving salary for this one-week course. I feel like I am giving something back to UCF and it helps keep the students' costs a bit lower.

Not surprisingly, my chairs and deans for the past 10 years have all been OK with this arrangement. Sadly, now, this might all be history.

The union that represents faculty at UCF recently started grievance proceedings against the university, attesting that approximately 20 faculty members were overpaid for teaching abroad between 2009 and 2012, while others were underpaid for their contributions. According to the union, all faculty members are to be paid at the negotiated 12½ percent rate of their nine-month, academic-year salary for summer teaching.

I have no objection for this regulation on campus, but study abroad is a very different beast. And, as such, compensation should be adjusted appropriately. I am a union member and would never want another faculty member to be coerced into undercompensation, but I would appreciate an "opt-out" policy for salary in teaching situations such as this.

Should I be paid the same when my teaching includes diving on one of the world's nicest barrier reefs and consuming resort-prepared food? It seems very different than lecturing to a room of 430 freshmen at 8:30 a.m. I was initially listed as being overpaid in the grievance until it was clarified that I took no salary for the course.

In an unexpected twist, I then learned that, according to union rules, I cannot volunteer my time either. According to the rules, I have to be paid at the negotiated rate.

I was told by the union that I could donate my salary to charity if I so choose. Sadly, that misses the whole purpose of study abroad for both me, a faculty member who wants to share my passion, and the students who need to find their way to be successful in the 21st century.

Adding on my salary may seem simple enough, but it will likely price my study-abroad course out of existence.

I am currently recruiting what I hope will be my next "best class ever" in Roatan, wondering what is going to happen to that line item in the budget.

My hope is that the Faculty Senate or someone else will figure out a fix for this so that I can do what I love to do – teach students about coral reefs and create the next generation of engaged science professionals.

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