

Northeastern University: Dialogue of Civilizations
2011 IIE Heiskell Award for Innovation in International Education: Study Abroad
Nomination Essay
Robert P. Lowndes

Dialogue of Civilizations: Overview

Northeastern offers two types of study abroad programs: traditional study abroad in which students study for a semester or more with an international partner institution, and our signature faculty-led Dialogue of Civilizations programs. In 2010, a total of some 1,650 students participated in all our study abroad programs with some 950 participating in our Dialogue of Civilizations programs.

Open to students of any major, the Dialogue of Civilizations programs connect Northeastern University students with their peers around the world in different national, cultural, political, and social environments. Each program is for a half-semester and includes two courses (8 credit hours), with specific themes (language, diplomacy, conflict resolution, public health, entrepreneurship, civil engineering, environmental studies, video production, music industry, etc.). In addition, the program requires engagement with people in the host country that will involve a dialogue and opportunities for service learning. The program provides students with a different global experience that builds upon and enhances their academic studies and training in Boston.

The goal of every Dialogue is to promote personal connections first and foremost; and to foster awareness and understanding between American students and their peers around the world. The “dialogue” in each country involves a series of meetings and discussions between students and local government and community leaders on a range of topics, including politics, popular culture, human rights, women and gender dynamics across cultures, and more. This means students are engaged in a series of discussions, debate, and (as often as not) friendly disagreements leading to a better understanding of one another’s point of view, even if not agreement on divergent points of view. The faculty leader of every Dialogue program sets up “a dialogue” – i.e., an event with dialogue, with a format conducive to enabling students to engage with one another in a place and a space (and preferably in a language) that establishes equal status among “dialoguers”.

Dialogue programs usually occur during Northeastern’s Summer semester, which is an active third term because of the University’s Co-operative Education program. The Summer semester is divided into two terms: Summer 1 (May-June) and Summer 2 (July-August). Nearly all Dialogues run in either Summer 1 or Summer 2, and must have at least 5 weeks of study abroad with pre-departure orientations and post-departure reflection and completion of assignments taking up the remainder of the term. The locations of the faculty-led programs may change from year to year, and the options are constantly increasing.

Faculty are the academic, financial, and logistical leaders of every Dialogue program. It is the Faculty Leader for the Dialogue who has the vision to develop and implement a Dialogue, building from his/her personal and professional experience in the country/countries where the Dialogue will occur.

The process to approve a Dialogue begins in the Fall semester preceding the Summer when the program is to be offered. Each Faculty Leader, based on their expertise for the country concerned, submits a detailed proposal outlining the proposed Dialogue giving: details about the courses to be offered and the instructors involved, including details about in-country guest lecturers; the rationale for the engagement part of the Dialogue including any service learning components; and a detailed day-by-day schedule and itinerary. A Review Committee consisting of the Vice Provost for International Affairs, the Director of the Office of International Study Programs (OISP), and the Director of International Initiatives reviews each proposal and selects the ones for approval. The approved programs are then posted on the OISP website with links to our on-line application process. The Faculty Leader is responsible for selecting the students for his/her program, usually involving an interview process, and based on criteria submitted during the proposal submission process. During the two-month application and enrollment period, the Faculty Leader will develop a formal budget for the program. Once approved, this budget can include a pre-planning visit by the Faculty Leader to the country concerned to develop and finalize logistical and academic details of the Dialogue. The Faculty Leader is fully responsible for the approved budget and its reconciliation.

Only Northeastern faculty may be a Faculty Leader. However, a Dialogue usually includes additional personnel selected by the Faculty Leader for their additional or complementary academic expertise; these personnel can be from the U.S. or from the host country. The Faculty Leader teaches at least one of the two courses plus oversees the instruction for the second course. A Faculty Leader usually also has one or more additional support persons, typically graduate students, to help with on-the-ground logistical support. All personnel involved receive extra compensation according to pre-approved scales.

Typically, a Dialogue program has some 15-25 students. Usually Dialogue programs are based in one country, but can involve more than one location in the country. A few Dialogues involve more than one country where conflict resolution or comparative cultures are the themes of the Dialogue. The program costs include all educational, travel and accommodation costs. The Dialogue programs cost the same or less than the costs of tuition plus room and board on campus. In addition, student financial aid can be used on the Dialogue programs. Consequently there is no financial barrier to student participation and the programs are open to all NU students.

Program Snapshots

It is instructive to give three program snapshots in Egypt, India, and Switzerland.

a) Egypt

The Dialogue in Cairo was the very first Dialogue and now has more than 500 alumni who have lived, studied, and experienced Egypt and engaged in meaningful discussions with their peers in the heart of the Arab world.

The six-week Dialogue in Egypt allows students to deepen their understanding of the Arabic language (Egyptian dialect in particular), Islam, U.S. policy in the Middle East, civil society and community activism, Egyptian culture and politics. All of this occurs in the context of classroom experience (language immersion throughout the six weeks), lectures by the Faculty Leader, dialogue and discussions with Egyptian students, site visits and meetings with Egyptian policy makers, policy analysts and journalists, religious leaders, cultural events, and independent learning projects.

The students also engage in service learning, principally in a refugee center that gives legal aid, English-language training, and other support services to refugees from Iraq, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and other parts of Africa or the Middle East. Other students have worked in Egyptian NGOs that provide support to single mothers and their children, to underemployed men seeking new skills, and community youth organizations.

The Dialogue in Egypt has also offered a comparative culture component by incorporating a week-long visit to other countries in the region including Syria, Jordan, UAE, and Qatar. In Damascus, Syria, for example, the students had the opportunity to dialogue in one-hour separate meetings with the Minister of Education and the Minister of State.

Increasingly, these six weeks in Egypt result in students returning to Egypt (or elsewhere in the Middle East) to participate in a semester-abroad (in Cairo or Beirut), another Dialogue (in Israel-Palestine, Syria, Turkey, or Morocco), or to work on a cooperative education job, or to return for graduate studies (Cairo, Beirut, or Be'er Sheva, Israel).

b) India

The program theme in India is to teach students to identify, define, investigate and act upon social problems they care about. Students are trained in the field of social entrepreneurship, which uses community development and business models to tackle social problems, whether through creating and disseminating new technologies or encouraging the growth of micro-enterprises and micro-finance; the focus is to use community development and business principles but emphasize social impact over profit. The program teaches students to use these principles in the hopes of creating sustainable projects grounded in social justice.

In the first half of the semester students participate in intensive pre-departure instruction in which they develop an understanding of current social and political issues in India and theoretical tools used for explaining why and how groups respond to social and economic inequality. Then, the students travel to Hubli, Karnataka, India, for the second half of the semester for the Dialogue part of the program, which is supported in part by a Deshpande Foundation grant. Here, in addition to further course instruction, the students engage in service-learning and capacity building projects in Hubli. Students participate in site visits and lectures within NGOs, and work with a range of organizations including an education foundation, a micro enterprise organization working that supports under and unemployed women, and an institute for rural development.

Students are paired with local Indian university students and participate in a cross-cultural workshop on NGO development, grassroots organizing and social entrepreneurship. Last year, seven student groups presented their innovative project proposals, including efforts to improve waste management in the slums of Hubli, water conservation and improved sanitation through emerging technologies, recycling and women's empowerment, and providing active learning, teaching and tutoring for local students.

c) Switzerland

The Geneva Dialogue is titled Disarmament Diplomacy and Humanitarian Action. The Dialogue exposes students to the practice and real life of diplomacy and negotiation of key international politics issues at the highest level that occur in the city of Geneva, capital of humanitarian diplomacy, and European headquarters of the United Nations. It also endeavors to provide students with opportunities and possibilities of networking for future professional possibilities.

Students spend a month at the United Nations, interacting with diplomats and negotiators from several countries, as well as United Nations personnel, non-governmental organizations, researchers, academics, and students from around the world. They learn about world politics in action and how international cooperation occurs in the making of new international treaties and initiatives to address some of the most pressing problems humanity faces today.

The focus of this Dialogue is on pressing issues of disarmament, arms control, international humanitarian law, and human as well as international security. Beyond lectures, there are active and hands-on activities such as debates, role playing, visits, and discussion. This is an extraordinary and unique opportunity afforded only to Northeastern University students. There is no other university that offers the same elaborate month-long opportunity at the United Nations.

Program Outcomes

Over the last few years, Dialogue programs have grown dramatically in interest and participation by both faculty and students. In 2005 there were just three Dialogue programs offered with approximately 60 students participating. In 2010, there were 49 Dialogue programs offered in forty countries with some 950 students participating.

The Dialogues promote significant student interest and participation in traveling to less traditional study-abroad countries. According to IIE's 2009 Open Doors report, 79% of all U.S. study-abroad students go to 25 destinations. But for our Dialogue programs, nearly 40% of the Dialogue students participate in countries not in IIE's top-25 destinations. These countries include: Armenia, Dominican Republic, Croatia, Cuba, Cyprus, Benin, Bosnia, Egypt, Ghana, Iceland, Indonesia, Jordan, Kenya, Morocco, Peru, Serbia, Syria, Thailand, Trinidad, and Turkey.

The Dialogues are especially attractive to freshmen and sophomore students. In 2010, 77% of our freshmen and 89% of our sophomores participating in study abroad did so through the Dialogue programs. Thereafter, the upper-class level participation is split almost equally between Dialogues and traditional study abroad. Freshmen and sophomores account for about 27% of our total study-abroad enrollments. This early participation by freshmen and sophomores leads to enhanced possibilities for a second international experience later on serving as a feeder for a traditional semester-long study abroad, another Dialogue, or our international co-operative education program.

The four critical learning outcome assessment metrics that we survey are Cultural Consciousness, Engagement, Global Awareness, and Social and Emotional Growth. In all areas, the results show increases between the pre- and post-surveys despite the very high expectations for these components in the pre-survey. Results also show significant correlation between post-test scores and student opportunities to engage with the local community.

The Dialogues have engaged both our students and our faculty. In 2010 more than 50 faculty participated as Leaders or Co-Leaders in our Dialogue programs forging a significant global spirit on campus. Pedagogically, Dialogues promote faculty-to-faculty mentoring, with experienced Faculty Leaders working with junior faculty in faculty development and training workshops, and Blackboard discussions.