

Study-Tour Courses Teach Consumer Issues & Policy

In consumer classes at our universities, faculty discuss consumer issues and policies; however, many students do not realize that they may actually be employed in a position that requires them to collect facts, pose solutions, and other tasks that help shape policies with respect to consumer issues. One way to make issues and policy "come alive" is through a study-tour experience.

Julia Marlowe, The University of Georgia¹
 Teresa Mauldin, The University of Georgia²
 Charles Hatcher, The University of Georgia³
 Anne Sweaney, The University of Georgia⁴
 Carol Meeks, Iowa State University⁵
 Martin Coppack, Syracuse University⁶

In a study-tour or internship situation, students have the opportunity to meet professionals from government agencies, businesses, and the non-profit sector. These experiences help students realize that they too may be one of these professionals some day. Various programs presented as a panel at the 1998 ACCI conference are outlined in this paper. At the University of Georgia (UGA) two courses are conducted on-site in Washington, D.C. One course focuses on housing policy and is titled *Housing Policy in Action at the Federal Level*. The other course is *Consumer Policy in Action*. In addition, the University of Georgia offers a London Study Abroad Program. This program includes several courses which are offered on-site in London. The London program also allows students the opportunity to intern in London. Syracuse University has been supportive in helping students participate in internship abroad programs. In an effort to internationalize the curriculum and offer a study-abroad program at minimal costs, the University of Georgia has developed a course, *The Global Marketplace: Mexico*.

Study Tour in D.C., *Housing Policy in Action at the Federal Level*

Housing Policy in Action is a course offered by the Department of Housing and Consumer Economics, College of Family and Consumer Sciences at the University of Georgia. Each year the course improves due to the contacts made and the experience gained. This course's strength is attributed in part to the many years of experience and contacts made by Meeks and Sweaney. It is important to point out that this is the type of course which does not just happen but is based on collaborations fostered over the years. The pre-preparation can not be overlooked for the success of the course. Issues need to be identified prior to the course and visits to the agencies and organizations related to these issues are then arranged. Agencies and organizations are very cooperative and seem to enjoy sharing their knowledge with the students. Also, critical to the success of the course is the preparation of the students. Each student is briefed on the requirements of the course and taken on an electronic field trip to introduce them to the agencies and organizations they will meet first hand when on-site in Washington D.C. The pre-preparation for the on-site tour is essential. Each student is required to acquire knowledge about the course content they will experience before they travel to the actual sites to be visited. With proper planning by the faculty members, an on-site class can be a magnificent, culminating learning experience for students. On-site visits allow for partnerships to develop between the sites visited and the university.

Sites visited during the *Housing Policy in Action* class have been the Federal Reserve Board, Fannie Mae, American Association of Retired Persons, Housing and Urban Development, USDA Rural Economic and Community Development, Freddie Mac, Manufactured Housing Institute, Housing Assistance Council, The World Bank, Federal Housing Finance Board and the National Research Council of the National Home Builders. A day is spent at the Capitol with individual appointments arranged with the Congressmen from the students' districts. Photo sessions are arranged with the Congressman representing Athens, home to The University of Georgia, and at least one Senator from Georgia.

If Congress is in session the students have an opportunity to see their lawmakers in action. A special treat has been a luncheon held in the Members Dining Room in the Capitol.

Some of the obvious benefits to organizing an on-site housing class include meeting professionals in the field, clarifying pro-and con-positions on some issues, and recognizing that effecting change in the real world takes time. Moreover, the essence of an on-site class is to add a much needed realism to the knowledge and information gained during a student's college years. Faculty who accept the challenge to offer an on-site class often find that it is so valuable an addition to their curriculum that such an on-site program is offered on a regular basis. Students often find employment ideas and opportunities they would not have been aware of without the course.

Study Tour in D.C., *Consumer Policy in Action*

Consumer Policy in Action is the Department of Housing and Consumer Economics (UGA) study tour course planned for summer 1998. This field experience offers undergraduates and graduate students the unique experience of both utilizing the theories of consumer protection and regulation they have been exposed to academically, and also an important professional and cultural experience as they learn about the kinds of opportunities available to them in our nation's capital. The course has three major parts. The first week students spend on campus gathering background information on the various organizations they will visit, such as The Federal Trade Commission, the Federal Reserve, the Consumer Product Safety Commission, the Department of Justice, and the House Subcommittee on Telecommunications, Trade and Consumer Protection. During this preliminary week, local officials at several of these organizations' regional offices in Atlanta are invited to campus as a resource to assist in the information-gathering process. The second week is spent in Washington visiting the various organizations. Carefully chosen representatives, many of whom have ties to Consumer Economics/Resource Management programs, take a few hours to talk to the students about the organization's mission, current agenda, and directions for the future. Students also have an opportunity to ask questions about professional preparation and job opportunities. The third week is for evaluation; the instructors evaluate the students using both a take-home test and a short summary of their experience. Students "evaluate" using a series of survey instruments, which gauge attitudes regarding the instructors, the organizations, the speakers and Washington itself.

University of Georgia London Study Abroad Program

In 1992, the College of Family and Consumer Sciences at the University of Georgia in partnership with the American Institute for Foreign Study (AIFS) took five students to London for a study abroad experience. Since that time, three additional groups of students have spent six weeks in London taking courses and working.

AIFS works with faculty members from the College to design a special summer program for our students. AIFS provides the logistical support services such as housing, transportation, and advanced planning, as well as classroom space in either Kensington or Bloomsbury Richmond College campuses. Students are housed in flats in Kensington or out from the city if the student decides to participate in a homestay.

In addition, AIFS provides teaching support for a required course in British Life and Culture. Faculty members from the College of Family and Consumer Sciences teach a course or courses in their area of expertise, utilizing the resources of London to provide out-of-classroom experiences. In our Global Consumer Issues course in 1997, students visited British Telecomm at the time they were attempting to buy MCI. What an interesting discussion came out of that visit. In addition, students visited the Quality and Customer Service Offices of Marks and Spencers and the Office of Fair Trade. London offers numerous opportunities for field trips and more contacts have been made for future summers.

Students also participate in a 6-week work experience. AIFS makes the contacts for work experiences based on student resumes and cover letters. Students have worked at the American Chamber of Commerce, Co-operative Bank, as well as interior design firms, fashion design firms, publishing houses, charitable organizations, auction houses, hospitals. This is the area where students feel that they benefit the most from the program. Faculty members perceive the work experiences to be the area where we need to continually work to strengthen the program.

Students indicate that they learn greater tolerance for differences in people, and develop an appreciation for the "world" and want to keep up with what is happening in the world beyond Georgia. But most of all they indicate that the work experience provides them with an opportunity to grow.

Syracuse University Internships Abroad Program

With the help of Syracuse University, students have been placed in internships abroad. Through appropriate placements in organizations, valuable experience can be gained for students in the consumer studies field. Such experiences are often referred to as beneficial in terms of providing students with insight to the real world of

industry and other employing bodies. Less prominence is perhaps given to the invaluable role such work-based experiences can play in facilitating the learning of policies and issues of interest to consumer affairs professionals.

By appropriate placement a student can be exposed to a variety of consumer issues and policies. Some examples include industrial procedures for monitoring and reacting to consumer led policy development, issues related to the balancing of marketing objectives and consumer interests, and internal consumer related policy development within organizations. By participation in international internship programs, students can learn first-hand about issues which are of importance in different cultures, and learn how consumers and providers react to different policies depending on the various markets. In addition to the differences among countries, students can witness the similarities in consumer issues around the world. Such international experience can be seen as extremely relevant now and in the future due to globalization of markets and the role multi-national companies presently play in providing goods and services across contents.

Finally, such experiences can assist students who want to effect change in the interests of the consumer. Through knowledge of the consumer/provider interface, future practitioners are better equipped for collaborative ventures of benefit for all involved.

Study Tour in Mexico, *The Global Marketplace: Mexico*

The Global Marketplace: Mexico is the Department of Housing and Consumer Economics (UGA) study tour course planned for summer 1999. The course will be taught in Xalapa, Veracruz in Mexico. The course will provide students with opportunities to learn more about the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and relevant consumer issues and policy, as well as learn about different family systems. Communication with others who speak a different language provides students with challenges and opportunities. Such experience helps prepare students for jobs where possessing cultural sensitivity is important. Students will have classroom instruction at the University of Georgia before going to Mexico and again upon returning. While in Mexico, students will attend classes, participate in field trips and individual learning activities. The study tour course in Mexico is designed so as to minimize costs, thereby enabling financially disadvantaged students to participate. Students will be housed and fed by local families. Not only will this decrease costs, but students will have opportunities to learn more about the local culture by having this family connection.

Endnotes

1. Associate Professor, Department of Housing and Consumer Economics
2. Associate Professor, Department of Housing and Consumer Economics
3. Assistant Professor, Department of Housing and Consumer Economics
4. Professor and Interim Head, Department of Housing and Consumer Economics
5. Professor and Dean, College of Family and Consumer Sciences
6. M.S. Candidate, Department of Environmental Arts, Consumer Studies and Retailing