



## A study abroad director's response to unanticipated program disruptions

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### Abstract

*Those involved in study abroad education know that unanticipated program disruptions present unique challenges. Such disruptions range from minor issues such as forgotten items to truly catastrophic events including natural disasters, health emergencies, and political unrest. This report is guided by an interpretive study approach to better understand the experiences of one study abroad program director as they navigated their own programmatic disruptions caused by COVID-19 during the spring 2020 semester. Reflective journal entries comprise the primary data for the report which are then analyzed using narrative inquiry as an interpretive guide. Recommendations include a call for better study abroad onboarding programs for faculty and staff program directors and for increased attention to faculty and staff perspectives in study abroad contexts.*

**Keywords:** *Study Abroad, Program Disruptions, Program Director Perspectives, COVID-19*

**Language(s) Learned in This Study:** *Spanish*

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### Introduction

On January 20, 2020, I spent the evening conducting oral proficiency exams with each of the nine students in my semester-long Northern Spain study abroad program. At that time, according to the World Health Organization Situation Report 1, there were 282 worldwide cases of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) (World Health Organization, 2020). The total number of worldwide deaths from the virus was six. On March 4, 2020, the program students and I set out on a four-day excursion to the Basque Country to explore the multilingual and multicultural sites of San Sebastián, Guernica, and Bilbao. During the excursion, I led students down cobbled side streets, across elaborate bridges, and up the sides of formidable mountains. As we walked, we listened to the orchestral blend of the Spanish, Basque, and English languages and analyzed their official and non-official representations throughout the linguistic landscape. On the third day, we hiked up to a ninth century hermitage perched atop the rugged ocean isle of San Juan de Gaztelugatxe. We felt the fierce ocean wind on our faces and smelled the salt spray from the crashing waves below. In the shadow of the stone church, I shared stories of witches, pirates, and apostles who, according to legend, had all stood where we were standing and saw much of what we were seeing. That evening in a small cafe overlooking the Bay of Biscay we discussed what we had heard about the Coronavirus and wondered aloud about how it would affect our program. We thought we were safe. We thought we would be unaffected. Exactly one week after our conversation, we were on a bus headed to the Madrid airport, leaving before any of us had a proper chance to say goodbye to the people and places we had come to love.

## Responses to Study Abroad Program Disruption

In their edited volume, Bista, Allen, and Chan (2022) include a wide range of student, staff, and faculty experiences involving study abroad programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the book's introduction, the editors explain that "Nations around the world were closing their borders completely to non-citizens, halting most of global mobility and academic exchanges. Students were stuck on either sides of borders, unsure whether or not to return home" (p. 2). Chapters focusing on study abroad directors and support staff experiences make up a smaller portion of the volume's content, mirroring in large part the imbalance of perspectives found in the broader context of related studies and reports.

Reasons for study abroad program disruption are varied, including causes such as global terrorist attacks (Terzian & Osborne, 2006) and natural disasters (Brazelton & Buford, 2022). Lucas' (2009) study of student mental health issues during study abroad is of particular interest given that it focuses on the role of the residence director in helping students navigate such challenges. For the most part, however, research examining the effect of study abroad program disruption has largely focused on the student perspective. Such perspectives are highlighted, for example, in Wang's (2022) study of disrupted student travel plans during the pandemic as well as Koo's (2022) and Fanari and Segrin's (2021) studies of mental health challenges that students faced upon returning from their study abroad programs.

Fewer studies have focused on the effects of program disruptions on systems of support. From this smaller body of work, we find a collection of pandemic-related issues including forced pedagogical adjustments (Brazelton & Buford, 2022), increased workload demands to university support systems (Luczaj, Kurek-Ochmanska & Rozmus, 2022), and impacts to university branch campuses (Merola, Coelen, Hofman & Jansen, 2022). Oshita (2022) and Gibbs' (2022) essays are particularly reflective of my own experience as program director during the pandemic and reveal how many of us working in international education at that time, despite our feelings of professional disconnectedness, were not entirely alone.

## Methodology

In response to the scarcity of reports on program director responses to unanticipated disruptions, I present my own experience as a faculty study abroad program director whose program was cut short due to the onset of the pandemic. For guidance, I looked to Ellis and Bochner's (2000) exploration of autoethnographic research which was particularly influential in my framing of the study. By way of analysis, I employed a narrative inquiry approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to draw from personal journal entries generated during the spring 2020 semester. Further informed by Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009), I describe myself as an insider researcher given my role as study abroad program director with first-hand experience of having to respond to the program disruptions caused by COVID-19.

## Researcher Positionality

In 2019 I was selected to be the program director for a study abroad consortium program located in Northern Spain. My role as director included teaching one of the program courses, assisting with host family assignments, providing student support for physical and mental health matters, orchestrating program excursions, and handling arrival and departure transportation details. The program director role was a commitment of 1 academic year, divided into fall and spring student cohorts. Apart from my general academic preparation to become a professor, I had no formal training in study abroad program management. In fact, the administrative role I found myself in was new to me. Prior to the start of the program, I received some support from my campus' office of international education as well as from the office of international education at a sister campus which served as the primary coordination site for the multi-institutional study abroad consortium. These offices helped by providing information about the students who had been admitted to the program, details about how the program was to be financially administered, and overviews of curricular and experiential learning components. What was missing, however, was specific training for how to manage unanticipated program disruptions.

I acknowledge the personal bias that may be present in the analysis that follows and offer my conclusions

not as a generalizable call for action, but rather, as insight to my own experience as a study abroad director. It is my hope that from this report, other faculty and support staff might be inspired to reflect on their own programs and to identify ways to increase the overall preparation for those involved in study abroad education.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

As a reflective practitioner, I journaled during my time as program director and entries ranged from trivial personal matters to programmatic notes on how certain processes might be improved for future iterations of the program. For the present study, I draw from a series of journal entries produced while I directed the spring 2020 cohort. Entries that did not refer to my work as program director were not included in this analysis. The series of selected journal entries (N=13) have been divided into three parts, separated by those produced before, during, and after programmatic disruptions caused by COVID. Entries were also edited to protect the identity of those involved in the program. Case and death counts were obtained from the World Health Organization Situation Reports (World Health Organization, 2020).

### **Program Director Journal Entries**

#### ***Pre-Disruption Entries***

In January 2020, I welcomed my second cohort of study abroad students to Spain. Professionally, I had gained some confidence in my abilities as a new program director from my experience with the preceding fall cohort. I had established good working relationships with key program partners including the local on-site director, the instructional staff at the local university, the host family organizer, and the primary contact points for transportation. Feeling somewhat more familiar with the overall logistics of the program, I was looking forward to dedicating more of my energy to my instructional role as an educator of language and culture. Perhaps for these reasons, the journal entry I produced on January 20, 2020, centered around the rather typical exercise of administering language proficiency exams to this new group of students:

I spent the evening doing oral proficiency exams with each of the nine students in my northern Spain study abroad program. They fumbled familiar words and blamed their errors on the jet lag. I smiled and consoled. They'll get better.

Although I was completely unaware at that time, I would later learn that on that same evening, the total number of COVID cases worldwide was 282 and that six people had already died from the disease.

Eight days later, on January 28, I awoke to a text message from one of the new students that read, "Hola, profesor. My throat is very sore and I think I need to see the on-campus doctor because it is really bothering me." What I had not fully understood prior to taking the post as study abroad program director was just how much of my time and energy would be consumed by non-instructional activities. It is easier now to see the naivete in my thinking, but at the time these new adjustments challenged me professionally. Prior to my experience as study abroad director, my relationship to my students was largely restricted to the world of the classroom. What they did before and after our 90 minutes, twice a week together, was entirely up to them. However, as study abroad program director, it felt like the ratios between instruction and logistics had been reversed. This reversal of roles had caught me off guard, a fact which is supported by the rest of my journal entry from that same day. Prompted by the student's text message, I wrote in my journal:

Six months in and I've realized that I don't like working in international education. It's new and hard and I don't like the weight of it. I prefer the quiet and peace of my campus office. The on-campus doc prescribed an antibiotic. I sent out a group text: 'Lots of rest and healthy eating, folks! Don't let that Spanish nightlife ruin the semester for y'all.'

Reports by the World Health Organization for that day indicated that worldwide cases of COVID had jumped to 4,593 and that deaths now totaled 106. Eleven days later, on February 8, I wrote a short journal entry which again, seems to suggest just how overwhelmed I was by the change in my professional roles and responsibilities. On that day, I wrote that I had, "spent the whole day hiking on the Camino de Santiago

with my family, a much-needed break from it all.” That same day, the very first confirmed case of COVID in Spain was registered. Worldwide cases had risen to 34,886 and worldwide total deaths was 724.

On February 13, I again used my journal as a space to vent frustration with having found myself converted from educator to administrator:

I took two more students to the on-campus clinic this morning. It’s hard to avoid getting sick when you’re at the discoteca until 0500. When they asked if I’d go with them to see the doctor to help translate, I texted back, ‘You bet! I’ll meet you right outside.’

These pre-disruption entries can be grouped into what might be described as typical grumblings of a new study abroad director trying to help their students balance the social and academic demands of an extended program.

The last of the pre-disruption entries was written on March 7 and marks a transition point in the spread of the pandemic and in myself as my focus moved from general facilitation of the program to protecting my students, my family, and myself from the threat of a full-scale pandemic. On the last night of a four-day excursion to the Basque Country with the students, I wrote the following:

I heard about a death from the virus right here in Bilbao, so I told the students to be sure to wash their hands. I took the students to see a show at the Teatro Arriaga. There was a modern dance performance, but it could have been a puppet show for all I cared; I just wanted to see the inside of that beautiful building. The hour and a half experience was a powerful reminder that life’s most visceral moments have no preamble. They are not sandwiched between guidebook summaries and five-page research papers. They happen in the blink of an eye and in the beat of a heart.

For many, March 2020 marked the official onset of the pandemic and the remaining journal entries from March 12 onward reflect what it was like to navigate program disruptions while at the same time dealing with my own mental and emotional turmoil. On that last day in the Basque Country, worldwide cases had climbed to 101,927 with worldwide deaths totaling 3,486. Spain now had 374 confirmed cases of COVID and a total of five related deaths.

### ***During Disruption Entries***

The excursion to the Basque Country marked the unexpected end to normalcy for our program. Over the next 5 days, worldwide cases of COVID increased by more than 20,000 with confirmed cases in Spain increasing by a factor of nearly six. COVID-related deaths in Spain had risen from five to 48. On March 12, my journal entry shows how my complete attention had shifted from managing the program to planning for its immediate truncation:

It’s Thursday. Cases in Spain jumped by 500 overnight. At 0200 Spain time, President Trump issued a travel ban for all of Europe with the exception of the United Kingdom. Emergency evacuation initiated. Since US citizens are exempt from the travel ban, evacuation flights are arranged for the students in my program for March 17 to let them have a few days to say goodbye to the beauty of it all.

Whatever challenges I was facing as a new study abroad director were put on hold as I now faced a new obstacle, orchestrating an emergency evacuation of my students back to the United States.

Every day brought news of problematic closures of transportation lines, flight cancellations, and increased restrictions on movement throughout the city of Santander. We took solace in the fact that we at least had a few days to say our goodbyes and to bring our collective experience to a meaningful closure. Then, the very next day, related deaths in Spain nearly doubled and confirmed cases in the country increased by just over 800. I was told that plans for evacuation were to be moved up and that we had less than 48 hours to make our way to Madrid so that students could catch their immediate return flights to the US. The following journal entry, recorded on March 13, provides insight into my own thinking on the day we learned that the evacuation was to be carried out much sooner than we expected:

It's Friday. I was sitting in a crowded restaurant in a crowded Spanish town. I was halfway through my burger when a news alert popped up on my phone: Spain declares a state of emergency. Cases jumped by 825 overnight. Extreme measures will be taken to control the spread of the virus. I'm picturing barricades and riot shields and airports with no airplanes. I scrambled. Flights are moved up. I begged a bus driver to take us to Madrid where we'll stay in a hotel overnight. He doesn't want to go but he does.

All my attention was focused on my students. I was making constant phone calls and sending streams of text messages to our host-family organizer, the on-site program director and the charter bus company. The support team of international education staff back in North Carolina were working valiantly to handle flight details and to arrange for student pick up once the students were back in the US. The following day, I was on a bus with my students speeding down an empty highway toward Madrid. My journal entry from March 14 describes how additional unanticipated challenges were awaiting us on the journey to Madrid:

We left for Madrid at 1600. Forty-five minutes into our five-hour ride, something in the bus's belly went boom and the bus lost power. We pulled over. Everyone was panicking but trying not to show it. Police on motorcycles came to see what was going on. Our driver called two bus driver friends who happened to live nearby. They showed up with tools and curse words and slapped some sort of clamp on the tubo and the bus started up again. Closer to Madrid there were glowing highway signs with warnings for all: 'Don't travel. Stay in your homes.' The highway was a desert. Not sure if we can even get to our hotel or if we'll be turned away. We got here, late. We stepped outside to the sound of clapping and church bells. 'You know why they're all clapping?', the bus driver asked me. I shrugged my shoulders. My mind was very much elsewhere. 'They're clapping for the healthcare workers, for those who can't stay home.' 'People like you', I thought but didn't say.

A second and final complication presented itself the following morning as we were getting ready to board the bus to the airport. In my journal, I provided the following account:

I woke up before my alarm after a restless night of sleep. As I was about to board the bus to shuttle to the airport, I got a message that two students were stuck in the elevator. I ran to the front desk. Hotel staff and I ran towards the elevator. '¡Vamos a rescatarlos!' I carried their fifty-pound suitcases down three flights of stairs and moments later they somehow made it out of the elevator. We got to the airport and answered all kinds of questions: 'Where are you coming from? Where did you stay last night? How did you get here?', all asked in a monotone drone that terrified more than it comforted.

After getting students checked in and through security, I waited at the airport until I knew with certainty that they were in the air, safely on their way back to their homes. Once their flight had departed, I sent a text to our bus driver thanking him for his bravery. I then learned that he had parked the bus nearby, also waiting to make certain the students' flight had departed before driving back. Before boarding my own regional flight to return to Santander, I sat alone on a bench in a strangely quiet Madrid airport. At that moment, my thoughts finally started to shift from my students to the safety and wellbeing of myself and my family. In hindsight, I can see now that navigating this logistical nightmare came at a great cost to my family and to my own mental and physical wellbeing. Once back in Santander, like everyone else, we quarantined ourselves in our small apartment, unsure of what was to come next.

My journal entry from March 18, just four days after carrying out the emergency evacuation of my students, shows how my attention had shifted back to my family and to myself:

The Virus continues to move while we stay still, quarantined in the walls of an apartment that overlooks a boatless bay. Police presence has increased and now the Ministry of Defense has come with their peacekeeping war vehicles and their bright berets. We leave only to take the trash out and to get groceries. We enter one by one and pick up our loaves and our albóndigas and our eggs when there are some. I don't do well in place.

We were suspended in time and place, unsure of what would come next. At the time, we wanted to allow our daughters to finish the school year in Spain and then to make our way back home that summer, keeping with our original timeline. Although our lives had been radically transformed, we found hope in the idea of spending a few quiet months in Spain while we waited for the pandemic to subside. Within a matter of days, and to our great dismay, we learned that plans were to change yet again. On March 20, worldwide COVID cases had climbed to well above 200,000 with related deaths nearing 10,000. Cases in Spain totaled 17,147 with 767 related deaths. On that day, I wrote the following in my journal:

The University said we needed to come back to the United States. I petitioned. They denied. I petitioned again. They denied the petition again. I boiled in my anger and gave up the fight. When we told the kids, they cried. In the afternoon I called to arrange our taxis for the following day. The taxi company said they couldn't take my family of four to the airport, that we needed to split up into at least two vehicles. We were the only things holding each other together.

Unable to say our goodbyes to friends and colleagues in person, we stood outside of our apartment and hugged each other close. On the flight home, my spouse and I toasted our cups of Diet Coke in somber celebration of our 12th wedding anniversary. Our time in Spain had come to an end.

### ***Post-Disruption Entries***

I wrote only two journal entries shortly after arriving back to the United States, both of which reflect a shift in mood and an increase in feelings of uncertainty. In both entries I make cultural comparisons between our experiences with the onset of the pandemic in Spain and our return to the United States. On March 22, I wrote:

On the last leg of the journey, in the airspace between Miami and Charlotte, a deep red breached the black horizon and rose in layers of blues and purples. The flight attendants, airport convenience clerks, and the rental car employees all smiled sadly, hiding their concern and their fear behind their upbeat American hospitality. Spaniards wore their sadness and their happiness on their sleeves for all the world to see.

On that day, worldwide cases of COVID were nearing 300,000 and the worldwide death toll had jumped by more than 1,000 overnight to 12,784. In our home state of North Carolina, the death toll was reported by the World Health Organization to be exactly 0 with the total of confirmed cases in the state to be 255. It felt like we had gone back in time, that we had somehow outrun the pandemic we left behind in Spain. And yet, there remained a sense that the feeling of safety was only temporary. On March 23, I wrote one last journal entry:

Spent day one of our 14-day self-quarantine in a temporary apartment that the University made available to us. The authorities in Miami said self-quarantining was optional. We even asked twice because we thought that it was mandatory. People here in our small mountain town are aware but not panicked. Not yet. They haven't seen what we saw in Spain, the shuttered shops, the perfectly spaced queues of people wrapping around the grocery stores, the people enjoying a bit of fresh air on their balconies. Maybe it won't come here. Maybe it can't climb mountains.

On the day of this last entry, worldwide COVID cases totaled 332,930 with a total of 14,510 confirmed worldwide deaths. In Spain, the number of cases was nearing the 30,000 mark with a total of 1,720 confirmed deaths. In North Carolina, the total number of cases was reported as 297 with deaths, again, reported as 0. In the end, each of those numbers, including the number of deaths in North Carolina would grow to staggering heights. The ripple effect of the pandemic would be felt in every aspect of our lives and in every place throughout the world.

### **Discussion**

The journal entries span just about two months and document my own response as a study abroad program director to the unanticipated disruptions caused by the COVID pandemic. The pre-disruption entries from

January 20 to February 13, 2020 show my increasing sense of frustration with feeling less like an educator and more like an administrator. Although I had successfully completed the fall session of the program, I still felt new to the study abroad context and the negative tone of those early entries during the spring cohort show how I continued to struggle with the shift in my professional responsibilities. My admission in my January 28 journal entry that, “I don’t like working in international education” and that it all seemed “new and hard” reveals the depth of my dissatisfaction with the role of program director. The fact that I felt more like a parent rather than a teacher is evident in the judgement expressed in my February 13 entry where I remarked that, “it’s hard to avoid getting sick when you’re at the discoteca until 0500.” I like to think that perhaps, given enough time, I could have overcome this challenging shift from teacher to administrator. However, just a few weeks later, our program was unexpectedly cut short.

The journal entries from March 7 to March 20 provide insight to my management of the program during a catastrophic programmatic disruption. Every entry in the series mentions the pandemic, along with increasingly emotional and reflective contributions. The entries move from a hesitant denial during the program excursion in the Basque Country to increasing awareness of the gravity of the situation. My lack of preparedness for such a devastating disruption is clear from my emotionally charged phrasing including, for example, descriptions of “giving up the fight” in my March 20 entry, how I “don’t do well in place” in my March 18 entry, and “everyone panicking” in my description of the unexpected bus breakdown on March 14.

Moving into the post-disruption entries, the content is comparative in nature and carries tones of uncertainty, buoyed up by a forced optimism. In my entry on March 22, for example, I compare the “upbeat American hospitality” to my perception of how “Spaniards wore their sadness and their happiness on their sleeves for all the world to see.” Forced optimism can be noted in the final lines of my last entry in the series where I wrote that, “maybe it won’t come here. Maybe it can’t climb mountains.” Collectively, my journal entries from January to March show how I went from feeling frustrated with the challenges of my new role of study abroad program director to a sense of panic and chaos while carrying out an emergency evacuation for my students. My last entries carry a tone of forced optimism and uncertainty at finding my own experience cut short before I had the opportunity to fully adjust to the demands of my new role.

The shift in tone and emotion from the early journal entries to the final reflections coincides with other accounts of program disruptions. Gibbs (2022), for example, reported feelings of “confusion and apprehension” as well as “sadness, guilt, and ultimately acceptance that this was the correct course of action” (p. 198). Oshita (2022) concluded their reflective report optimistically stating they “strongly feel it is possible to safely resume study abroad program activities with sound policies, procedures, and plans in place so students can study abroad safely” (90). With this in mind and considering my own experience as a program director during the pandemic, I offer the following recommendations in the conclusion section below for those involved in study abroad education.

## **Conclusion**

Faculty who serve as study abroad program directors tend to be experts in their content areas. Some have received extensive training in disciplinary pedagogies, assessment, student engagement and other aspects of their professional posts as academics. These skills, although critical to effective teaching, do not always transfer neatly to the role of study abroad program director. Offices of international education and other support systems do tremendous work in supporting faculty program directors in these matters, but their assistance can be limited, particularly in emergency situations where critical decisions need to be made without delay.

In response to these challenges and considering my own experience as a study broad program director whose program was severely disrupted, I recommend an increase in pre-program training for study abroad program directors, giving particular emphasis on how to respond to unanticipated disruptions. What my thematic analysis shows is that insufficient preparation in this area can lead to tremendous emotional duress. In my case, the toll was such that I have yet to return to any work involving study abroad since directing

the program in Spain. For some institutions this may mean establishing and implementing dedicated structures for program director onboarding. For other institutions, this may mean updating existing onboarding materials to include specific preparation for unanticipated program disruptions. Improvement in these areas will require both institutional support and commitment from the program directors to participate in these enhanced onboarding protocols. Successful implementation of these changes may take time, but if there is a commitment to engaging students through study abroad experiences, then there must also be a commitment to carrying out those as safely and as effectively as possible. Ideally, these procedures should be cohesive among a wide range of institutions and externally validated, not unlike other quality enhancement programs in the areas of online teaching, faculty advocate training, and others.

On my own campus, study abroad program director preparation still lacks a robust orientation to navigating unanticipated program disruptions. The current onboarding practice takes the form of a slideshow presentation that includes general details such as important contact information for campus partners and information regarding insurances and financial matters. I was happy to learn that when time allows, program directors are also presented with some mock scenarios for how they might respond to a student who becomes ill while abroad or what to do in case of a problem with a student passport or visa. The problem is that these scenarios are addendums to the general presentation and lacking in depth and diversity. Still, this would be an excellent starting point for institutions wanting to better prepare their program directors to handle unforeseen programmatic disruptions. To assure their effectiveness, such scenario-based trainings should be included as obligatory components to the onboarding process and include a wide array of real-world program disruptions. Following each scenario, program directors could then engage in discussion about possible ways to respond that range from least to most effective. Other institutions may benefit from different solutions but for the best results, these efforts should be collaborative in nature and include those working in offices of international education as well as the faculty and staff who serve as program directors. This call to action is aligned with Gibbs (2022) and Oshita (2022) who, following their own experiences as study abroad program directors during the pandemic, recommended that campus partners review their practices and procedures to better protect against unanticipated disruptions.

Once back in North Carolina, the students continued to meet virtually with their professors in Spain to complete their coursework. Although they completed their studies of Picasso asynchronously, they were evacuated before our final excursion to Madrid where they would have had the chance to stand before the Guernica in the Museo Nacional Reina Sofia. Although the students continued to discuss Spanish literature via online forums and written reflections, they were forced to leave before we could visit Salamanca and visit the garden where Calixto was said to have met Melibea. As evidence of this persistent desire for the multisensory experience, a few of my students in the program later returned to Spain on their own, each seeking their own form of closure. And in the summer of 2022, I also returned to finish my trek along the Camino del Norte, picking up right where I left off, in a small sleepy town along the Bay of Biscay. Almost six years later and I have yet to lead another study abroad program. Navigating the complexities of my own disrupted program took a tremendous emotional toll, one which might have been mitigated had I been better prepared to navigate unanticipated program disruptions.

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## About the Author

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