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To: Ralph Kuncl, President, University of Redlands
David Fite, Vice President of Academic Affairs
Kathy Ogren, Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
Sara Falkenstien, Study Abroad Director

From: Monty Hempel, Environmental Studies

RE: Pre-Proposal for a Sustainability/Latin American Study Abroad Center for the University of Redlands

OVERVIEW

The University may benefit greatly from a low-cost alternative to Salzburg that provides study abroad students with an alternative cultural setting and academic focus. A study center in Latin America may provide the most promising alternative for reasons of proximity, cost control, and development of international opportunities that seem especially appropriate for Redlands.

The timing and focus of this preliminary proposal is a response to several converging needs, some departmental and some institution-wide. In the interest of time, I will simply list the principal reasons for considering this idea. First, we need a non-European center to complement our fine program in Salzburg and to provide our students with the option of experiencing life and learning in a developing country or region. In addition, we need a study abroad experience that encourages students to examine the emerging, interlocking challenges of development in the twenty-first century, in places where those challenges are becoming most visible (i.e., rapidly growing developing regions, such as Latin America). Finally, perhaps less obviously, we need a study abroad option that emphasizes integrative learning about sustainability -- one that systematically connects environmental, economic, and social factors that together determine a community's quality of life.

At the unit level, we need study abroad options that relieve overburdened departments and programs on campus with opportunities for more of their students to study off campus in places that enrich their education through practical immersion and experiential learning. Business and Environmental Studies are arguably the "poster children" for representing overburdened faculty beset by poor faculty-student ratios. A study abroad option that responds to the needs of their students will provide a small but important relief valve for reducing class size, advising loads, and other pressures of oversubscribed majors. If combined with a faculty position that alternates between teaching one semester in Redlands and teaching abroad the next, the ability to integrate courses and learning objectives that connect on-campus learning with study abroad increases dramatically. Much of the funding for an added faculty position could come from savings gained by concentrating study abroad in places with favorable cost ratios to on-campus study in Redlands. Depending on the tuition discount assumed for our students, some program designs will allow semester savings of more than \$4,000 per student FTE.

Arguably the most appropriate focus for a new international program can be found in the concept of "sustainable development." Sustainability requires integrative thinking about social, environmental, and economic health or quality of life. It promotes a transdisciplinary "leap" in learning that is seldom attempted in higher education, but sorely needed. And in terms of both institutional and departmental needs, it represents a very promising way to prepare students for the 21st-century challenge of becoming responsible global citizens.

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THE OPPORTUNITY

At least three considerations make this a good time to consider the establishment of a small center in Latin America:

1. The need to respond in a timely manner to (a) developments in a region that is widely perceived to be emerging as a major player in global affairs; and (b) developments at the University of Redlands that make new options for low-cost study abroad both academically and financially attractive.
2. Capitalizing on the opportunity to contract with or build on an existing study abroad center in Costa Rica that could serve the needs of the University without requiring extensive planning and development of facilities.
3. Capitalizing on the availability of highly relevant faculty resources that could be incorporated in University programs in new and exciting ways to expand our capacity and visibility in EVST, global studies, and sustainability.

What follows is a sketch of what might be possible with minimal effort and funding by the University. I will confine my analysis to the needs and opportunities facing the Environmental Studies Program. A similar kind of arrangement with Business Administration would seem desirable and feasible, but I will not presume to know anything about their needs, plans, or interest in this form of study abroad or, for that matter, in developing a Latin American subfield.

The practical consideration that may trump all others in a concept proposal like this one is the question of cost. I assume that any new center will have to be much cheaper to operate and manage than our existing center in Salzburg, as well as cheaper than on-campus education, thereby delivering net savings to the University for each and every student who takes advantage of the new center. These savings could help fund a special type of Redlands faculty line devoted to the integration of classroom learning in Redlands and experiential learning abroad. The ideal candidate would spend half the academic year teaching on campus - including at least one course directly aimed at preparing a student cohort for fieldwork in Latin America - and the other half leading the study abroad effort, where student learning involves a more applied, hands-on, and culturally-infused pedagogy.

In the spirit of adaptive management, the University could regard the new study abroad center as an experiment to be carefully evaluated after three years for the purpose of determining longer-term viability and educational value. Much would depend on the scale and proven travel course effects of drawing Redlands students off campus together, as a cohesive group, to experience new places in the company of familiar faces. Currently, most EVST students have to leave their classmates behind and strike off on their own to pursue study abroad in developing countries or, for that matter, anywhere outside Salzburg. This can be an obstacle to study abroad for many students and parents, alike. This is just one more reason to plan an experiment that offers a genuine alternative to students who are not drawn to Salzburg. The speed with which such an experiment could be started depends on many factors, but let me suggest one model that could be implemented with relative ease, if found to be desirable.

The Costa Rica Option

Earth Education International (EEI) is one of many small study abroad centers in Costa Rica (<http://www.earthedintl.org/>). Its operating base, Sam Ramon (~80,000 pop.), is located on the Pan Am (Inter-American) Highway, only about an hour away from the capital city, San Jose, and less than 45 minutes from the international airport. It is nestled in a mountain area with access to a wide range of ecological and cultural amenities, and a thriving business sector. With a year-round average temperature in the low 70s, it provides an attractive destination for study during all seasons.

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EEL organizes its study abroad mission around the theme of “Sustainable Global Stewardship.” It offers a semester-long program, as well as short courses of 10-11 days in summer and January. Courses stress hands-on learning and specialized study tours to diverse destinations, focused on sustainable business practices, agricultural and land use programs, alternative energy projects, community development through eco-tourism, and cultural, historical, and social service sites.

The founder and director of EEL is Dr. Miguel Karian, an Armenian American who has been leading study abroad programs in Costa Rica since 1996. He holds a Doctorate in Education from Arizona State University, and was a tenured associate professor at St. Cloud State University (Minnesota), where he began applying his multicultural interests to Environmental Studies and study abroad programs. He speaks fluent Spanish and varying degrees of several other languages, not counting his native English. He has lived in Thailand, Nigeria, Kenya, Jordan, Mexico, Costa Rica, and the United States.

I have traded e-mails with Miguel in the past and recently had lunch with him in Los Angeles, where we talked about EEL and his interest in developing a Redlands connection. I was impressed by his views about interdisciplinary teaching and experiential learning, and by the way in which he used sustainability as an integrative concept for bringing together studies of business, ecology, culture, and community in a Central American context. In the course of our conversation, it became clear that he was very well suited for the kind of hybrid faculty position I have long imagined for Redlands, in which someone spent part of the year teaching a normal set of classroom offerings in environmental studies and sustainability, and the other part engaged in taking students abroad to experience the places and issues to which they were introduced in the classroom.

In driving back to Redlands after our lunch, I concluded that there just might be a good match between Dr. Karian’s professional needs and our own. I see in him a very thoughtful, articulate, and dedicated teacher, who constantly lives between two worlds: that of his own America and that of the developing world, in which he’s lived for many years. To the degree that he could add real value to EVST, to our study abroad programs, and to our continuing interest in engagement with international education, it seemed worthwhile to offer one concrete model of what this proposal could become.

The long term-value of this proposal is not dependent on the employment of Karian or development of a particular center, be it in Costa Rica or elsewhere in Latin America. But it might provide some fast relief for some of the immediate challenges facing EVST and the University, as a whole. And, with the added development of two-way student and faculty exchanges with Latin America, it might mark an exciting new chapter in Redland’s contribution to international education.

I believe a lower-cost study abroad center that is in a safe place, relatively easy to reach, and engaged in questions about sustainable development offers enormous value, not only to Environmental Studies but to many other campus programs, as well. For all of these reasons I ask that you to give it some careful consideration and think boldly about how it could position Redlands for the future.