

Interview with Michael Vande Berg

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During your time leading education abroad at MSU what was your primary focus?

MSU will be #1 in study abroad in the country. Let's aim for a 40% increase in 4 years. It's time to market study abroad so it has the highest visibility in the state and nationally! With directives from President McPherson, Mick Vande Berg set off to accomplish these goals during this four year tenure as the Executive Director of the Office of Study Abroad (1995-1999).

[5:54 min]... "your three priorities are...and I'll give them to you as well as I remember them. I certainly remember the first two and I think I'm right about the third. The first one was "Michigan State will be #1 in Study Abroad in the country" and then he [President McPherson] elaborated a little bit on that. Number two was his preference would be that "Michigan State send all undergraduates abroad" but that the study abroad committee, which as you know had been chaired by John Hudzik had arm wrestled him into a lesser number 40% - he wasn't completely at peace with this but he said "that's the marker and you need to meet it in four years". We had four years to do it. And the third one had to do with marketing study abroad but it was in the context of making, no giving Michigan State the highest visibility around study abroad of any other institution, public institution or private in the state but also eventually, nationally. And so he laid out from his perspectives how it was going to be, that was going to be the arches during the time I was going to be at Michigan State. And in some ways it did frame my experience at Michigan State, there's no question about it." [7:14 min]

What were key events, initiatives and/or policies that were implemented or accomplished during your tenure or leadership with MSU's study abroad?

1. A Marketing Explosion

Vande Berg reinvigorated the study abroad fair during his tenure and implemented other marketing techniques such as establishing a marketing committee. The marketing efforts were to symbolize OSA reaching out to the colleges and faculty to show that OSA was invested in a team effort to send students abroad.

[30:53 min] ... "and that marketing committee became incredibly a major part of the success of the office of study abroad. It opened doors for us. It made us team players, it said "we care and we're going to help you do the things you need to do to get students abroad". It was spectacularly successful and it included the study abroad fair" [31:15 min].

2. Introducing an Incentive-based Budget Model

Vande Berg initiated, alongside John Hudzik, an incentive-based budgeting model and recognized that at the heart of the model was faculty. The model however was not set up for semester-long programs; rather it promoted short-term, faculty-led programs. Vande Berg believes that his greatest accomplishment of his tenure was initiating the incentive-based budgeting model.

[21:39 min] ...“the other thing that was involved here was the budget model. John Hudzik is probably as gifted a person around creative budgeting as anyone I've ever worked with. And John did understand the culture very well, both as a faculty member and as an associate dean, then as a dean. And the model that we put in place, what's the word we use for profitability - yes, incentive based budgeting which Lou Anna [Lou Anna K. Simon, MSU President] embraced because that was consistent with Lou Anna's philosophy of governance and what it did interestingly...is that that budget model in ways...that took me a bit to understand it...I did come to understand it - the budget model itself debilitated against semester programs in an interesting way”

3. Expanding to Semester under Direct Enrollment

60 new programs were opened during Vande Berg's tenure. Vande Berg initiated the semester under direct enrollment model, which was a shift from the short-term, faculty-led model for education abroad predominantly used at MSU. The development of these programs increased attention and energy related to education abroad across all levels of the institution.

In the 90s, nationally there were similar trends to encourage semester or more long education abroad programs. MSU was trying to change with the times but the institutional culture of faculty-led programs and incentive-based budgeting model preempted full adoption of the semester led programs.

[32:28 min]...“even though we weren't getting students into the 60 new programs we wished we would...the amount of energy generated by the process of opening new programs was considerable. We had faculty members who were excited about study abroad. We had deans who were paying attention to what was happening with programs, it was a cool thing, it generated its own sort of energy” [32:47 min].

[21:08 min]...“we had a mandate from the president, we had the ratification from the study abroad committee, we had strong support to say the least from John Hudzik, but it was all about numbers. So as long as we used the rhetoric around numbers we had a green light, there really wasn't much opposition. There wasn't a lot of understanding about the semester long programs but we could open them to our hearts content. It's just that we couldn't get very many students” [21:30 min].

4. Emphasizing a Student-centered Approach and Student Learning

Vande Berg's mission for OSA was to help students have the kinds of experience in study abroad that we all hope for—experiences that lead to growth, development and intercultural learning.

[8:46 min]... "another major focus became this idea that we were more than simply about pushing students out the door, we were about educating students and we recognized that that was going to mean that we had to intervene in some ways in the education of the students. That became the tension for me in my four years there between the institutional demand that we hit these targets, number 1 in the country, 40% at MSU, we put major efforts into marketing, all of that on the one hand versus a very strong sense that I had and now I have it even more strongly, that it's not about pushing students out the door it's thinking about how it is that educators can help them have the experience that we expect them and hope that they'll have. And that tension was unresolved during my time at MSU" [9:39 min].

The Dean's Designees and President McPherson call to action to increase the number of students studying abroad was a major driver during Vande Berg's tenure. The embedded assumption however, was that students would learn automatically by crossing political and linguistic boundaries. Unfortunately, as we know students don't learn by the simple virtue of 'going' abroad.

[10:13 min] "I think it deserves special notice... [it's] the duration issue. At the time that I was at Michigan State coming out of the environments that I had come out of and particularly coming out of the Instituto Internacional, I was the Chair of the English Department and then my 8 years at Kalamazoo, I've probably made more out of the duration issue than it deserved to have made - that is I placed a higher importance at that point than I do now, frankly. And one of my, and I say this so frequently, when I talk about the importance of duration and following research I've done and published and so forth we have a bad habit, we meaning the 'old guard' in international programs and I include myself in that camp, we have a really bad habit of telling people that students can't learn effectively if they don't go abroad for an x amount of time. Now if we'd been having this conversation 30 years ago we would have said one year, but by the time that I was at MSU, it had become one semester. And there are still people out there that are still convinced that if students don't go abroad for a semester they cannot possibly learn and develop in ways that we would like to see them learn and develop. I've really evolved beyond that position and have come to recognize that it's not about the length per se, it's about what happens to the students when there abroad no matter how long there abroad, that's it pure and simple." [11:52 min]

5. Collaborating with Academic Advisors

Vande Berg also recognized the importance of academic advisors as partners in the process of student learning.

[33:02 min]...“we recognized the importance of academic advisors. We recognized that we really needed to collaborate with them and it had to be a partnership. We couldn't be in a superior position and tell them what to do, it wouldn't have worked. They were the ones that could open the door or close the door where study abroad was concerned. A lot of good came out of that [partnership]” [33:15 min]

How, and in what ways did OSAs effort at MSU align with institutional and national priorities?

1. Introducing Semester-Length Programs

Vande Berg felt that MSU needed to explore the benefits of offering quality semester-length programs for students. However, there was resistance to change because the predominant narrative was the USAID model which was 3-4 weeks in the education abroad context with deeply engaged faculty leading the programs.

[14:52 min]...“I mean when I talk about a Michigan State culture the manifestations of study abroad that existed at Michigan State were results of a long evolution that had started with USAID funded projects and people bringing students abroad for a few weeks and that was the model that happened to work very well. But that was the advantage of the model, which it took me awhile to figure it out, I didn't figure it out while I was at Michigan State...I've come to figure it out as a huge advantage, how extremely well integrated study abroad is into (at the time I was there) in the 12 or 14 colleges. That means the deep involvement of the faculty, and the model that allowed for that is faculty leading students abroad. It was a model that everyone embraced” [15:48 min].

2. The Quality v. Quantity Debate

A cultural phenomenon ensued as 60 new programs were launched under Vande Berg's leadership. However, the influx in programs brought to question the “quantity v. quality” issue. What role should OSA play in health and safety contingency planning? In what ways should OSA be involved in student travel arrangements?

[38:55 min]...“what do we mean by quality. During those four years that I was at MSU, there was definitely a quality discussion taking place and NAFSA was all over a certain approach to quality which had to do with student services. It was increasingly important to people to focus on health and safety. Those were the days that we learned the vocabulary about preparing for, and responding to crisis and contingency planning. That was really, really, important at the time. Travel - should the home institution be engaged in the business of sending students abroad or were the risks institutionally too great? Were the risks to students too great if the institution didn't engage in arranging travel? These kinds of questions were very much in the era and the discourse, so there was a quality argument taking place. I would suggest what changed the context and it's both a cause and an effect is the emergence of the Forum on Education Abroad” [40:09 min]

What challenges did you face during your tenure at MSU's OSA?

1. Navigating the Union Culture

Professional staff in OSA were either “there for the job” or there because it was a “professional calling to support student learning and growth through education abroad”. Vande Berg found himself caught between the desire to hire staff who truly wanted to engage in supporting students and the union culture that prevented substantial change.

[8:02 min] “So in coming to Michigan State my sense was that we were going to be able to do that [offer intercultural support to student's learning] at Michigan State. My first year was very difficult, it was difficult in terms of the staff [who] at that point was unfamiliar with those kinds of ideas and staff regarded itself as largely a service not much focused on academic or intercultural issues to say the least. So I started to hire people that might make the difference in that regard” [8:30 min]

2. Faculty Resistance

Faculty leaders could not comprehend the benefits associated with semester long programs. Vande Berg began new initiatives and offered incentives for faculty to explore semester sites and become invested in how semester long programs might benefit students. Unfortunately, even though some academics were excited there were no real shifts to adopting the semester-long model. Vande Berg realized he was actually asking faculty to make a “paradigm shift”. In retrospect, Vande Berg expressed had faculty leaders been asked to reflect on ‘What is it that your teaching hopes to accomplish?’, ‘What is it that you’re hoping your students will learn when they go abroad?’, ‘What evidence do you have for that?’, and ‘What assessments could we use?’ ...might have been better received.

[17:18 min]... "we certainly tried. Let's first talk about what we did to develop faculty-led programs. We launched 60 programs in those four years. And I believe the majority of them were semester programs. We tried to work with the members of the Dean's Designees. Some of whom were not unfriendly to it. Some of whom got the point that it would be a way for them...because we were driving the rhetoric of quality of learning and we were driving this as a way of getting more students abroad and saying to colleges and departments who didn't have enough faculty members to lead programs, we said there is another way of doing it. We can set up a program and you can send 15 or 20 students on this program but getting a faculty member to understand that was difficult to do. The faculty did not really understand why that would be there advantage to do that personally and departmentally I would say. And so, what we tried to do was set a process - that was a program development process and the other was a site visit process, where faculty members would apply for funding and would be able to go abroad and explore a site. Some of the faculty members did in fact go and visit semester sites. In fact I went to Quito, Ecuador with a faculty member from Business and I went to Turkey with two faculty members and a Dean and looked at semester programs in Turkey. It was wonderful, I mean everybody was convinced that we were going to send gobs of students there and we sent almost no one. Again it was the kind of mechanisms if you like, that existed at the time, even though we tried to address it by setting up certain processes it was difficult because people were framing study abroad in one way and we were asking them to frame it in another way. We were asking them to go "click" and go into a culture shift; a perspective shift and we were not approaching that in an intercultural way" [19:30min].