

## Interview with Past Director Kathleen Fairfax

September 4, 2012

### Overview and National Context during Tenure:

Fairfax's tenure began in July 2001, approximately six weeks prior to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Also during Fairfax's 7 year tenure there were high profile cases in study abroad health and safety litigation, and the London transit bombings. These issues heightened the awareness of, and consequent need to address health, safety, and security issues for students participating in study abroad.

As well, the MSU Office of Study Abroad was experiencing massive growth, i.e. increasing student participation and new faculty-led programs. One of Fairfax's goals was to effectively manage this growth, and to do so, Fairfax was involved in various levels of system-building (i.e. hiring new staff, re-classifying positions, adding layers of management, professionalizing the office, and initiating a database system to manage student growth), as well as establishing effective processes and policies (i.e. health and safety, training faculty leaders on health and safety response) that reflected the broader national context.

*[9:57 min] ...."how would I characterize my time July 2001 to July 2008 - so for 7 years...the initial years was focusing on professionalization and to establish effective processes and procedures" [10:15 min]*

### Key Initiatives in OSA:

#### A. Growth and Professionalization

##### a. System Expansion

The Office of Study Abroad had 15 full-time employees and grew to 24 full-time employees in the 7 years. For example, three new coordinator positions and a budget management assistant were created.

Student participation grew from 1600 to 3000 students (2001-2007).

The OSA data base system was created to track and handle the massive growth in student participation.

*[10:18 min].... "my goal was: if we were to grow, and I could see the growth coming...there was a tremendous... you could almost see it coming...all the academic departments and new program requests were coming in fast and a lot of people were getting on board and we were obviously going to experience a big growth period and it was obvious to me administratively we weren't going to handle that very well and it was going to be very labor intensive, it's not going to work, it wasn't going to be very good. So the first couple of years, I really tried to focus on some of those procedures. The biggest one was the database." [11:03 min]*

## **B. Establishing Processes, Policies, & Positions**

### **a. Health and Safety**

Previously no policies and processes were established for travel security or travel warnings. OSA did not have a system to manage student health insurance information, health insurance waivers, and did not have a pre-existing relationship with the travel clinic. Fairfax took initiative and leadership in bringing health and safety to the forefront of OSA.

Fairfax utilized the Risk and Security Assessment Committee (RSAC) previously established by President McPherson to establish policies and practices related to health and safety at OSA.

Fairfax initiated the creation of a position within OSA for health and safety, and soon OSA began to play a national leadership role in study abroad health and safety.

*[11:56min]... "So, I started six weeks before 9/11. Suddenly a lot of attention was turned to the issues of health and safety and study abroad, not that it hadn't been a concern before and MSU has long...well, Peter McPherson's creation of RSAC - the Risk and Security Assessment Committee pre-dated 9/11, so MSU obviously was ahead of the curb on this" [12:18 min]...*

*[13:05 min]... "so using RSAC effectively to create policies...so it took everyone on board to agree to how things should be worded and how we should do it, have the whole waiver process, travel warning countries and all of that, and thinking about the repercussions if the student decides to go on their own anyway, and having to run through the Provost all the way up to make sure it was acceptable to the institution and that took a long time, but ultimately it was worth it!" [13:34 min]*

*[13:47 min]... "managing the health and safety for the number of students that we had...if we were going to do it well, it meant it was becoming a full-time job and in my view, MSU really was emerging as a national leader in terms of health and safety oversight and management and the best practices for some of these things" [14:08 min]*

*[14:42 min]... "I didn't feel comfortable with a rapid increase unless we had the right things in place for health and safety - the right policies, the right oversight, the involvement, you know at the time the travel clinic was not involved at all before I was there, so involving the travel clinic" [14:59 min]*

*[15:20 min]... "So, those basic steps - can you manage the information? Do you know where your students are? Do they have health insurance? Is it the right kind of health insurance?... mental health issues -you know, how do you address all of that and none of that had really been thought about or worked through and I think my first year there, we were sending 1600 students abroad and when I left it was almost 3000! So 1600 already is a lot to have abroad and not have a good way to know that policies and procedures were in place to really ensure their health and safety. So I was nervous already but putting the things in place really made it easier to go forward with those" [16:10 min]*

## **b. Faculty Training**

It was becoming apparent that since OSA programs were primarily composed of faculty-led programs, and health and safety of students was a priority - there was a responsibility to train faculty leaders in processes to ensure safety of participants.

*[16:53 min] ... "I think it was the field that was coming to play, it was also because the type of program that MSU had because we had so many of our own faculty led, so the responsibility was on us." [17:05 min]*

*[18:16 min].. "so doing health and safety when a lot of it depends on say your faculty and how well they are equipped to deal with problems...so the whole notion of faculty training didn't exist until I got there either" [18:35 min]*

### **Challenges:**

#### **A. Addressing credit for co-sponsored programs**

At the time, student credit hours from co-sponsored programs came back on transcripts as regular MSU credits or just as a block of unnamed transfer credits and did not list any specific courses. This was a cause for concern because students who participated in co-sponsored programs had no way of demonstrating what courses they took. It was an archaic way that MSU handled the issue partly because there hadn't been many students for whom it really mattered but as student participation in study abroad grew the system for how credits from co-sponsored programs were handled had to be addressed more effectively. However, administratively there was red tape and not much progress was made – except that the issue was brought to the forefront in the 2008 Task Force Report.

*21: 53 min]... "so I think the single biggest obstacle where I ran up against problems and it still has created problems and if I had to do it all over again, I would have done it differently was how we handled credit for co-sponsored programs and that was toughest thing I had to deal with and partly, it was out of my hands because of the way the policy got kind of changed around at the very last minute than what was intended....to what the administration decided it should be which became very difficult to implement suddenly but we ran up against problems with academic advisors and others on that point, unfortunately". [22:40 min].*

#### **B. Presenting OSA to outsiders**

During Fairfax's tenure three students and one faculty leader passed away, there were also the London transit bombings. There was increasing interest from outside the institution and from colleague about MSU's unique model for faculty-led programs and how it provided incentives back to the units. Fairfax spent much time on media releases and responding thoughtfully to inquiries from colleagues and the press to represent OSA in the best light.

*Kathleen: [29:38 min]...“you know there were some pretty big health and safety challenges but we managed to get through them I think. I think I dealt with three student deaths and one faculty death during my time there. The London bombings and those sorts of individual things...but you know they just happen, but as the more things happened we became better prepared to deal with them from each time. It's just that MSU was a big player in terms of study abroad, at least in the region and since the media market in the Detroit area is fairly small one thing that caught me by surprise is the amount of time that we would actually be focused on how many news interviews I did all the time...and luckily I had a lot of media training so it didn't really scare me, I gave so many different media interviews with radio and television and being able to portray MSU on positive things, but sometimes they were on...we had a whole press conference on the London bombings and I think that was something that really brought home how OSA was viewed from the outside. When you're inside of it working we're just a bunch of people working hard, going about our daily work and getting things done and making minor improvements here and there but the outside world looked at us very differently and I could see it in the media interest and I could see it in the interest from colleagues in the field..I was very frequently asked to consult with people on issues on how you fund and manage faculty-led programs because the model at MSU was very unique and a lot of people were very interested on how it worked and how it provided incentives back to the units and just in general there was quite a bit of interest in the database program when we started because it was brand new and people were wrestling with what are we going to do with data needs so it was very...it was eye opening to me to see how OSA was viewed from the outside.” [32:15 min]*

### **Successes:**

#### **A. Freshman Seminars Abroad**

The first Freshman Seminar Abroad began in 2003 to the Université de Laval, Quebec City, Canada. Fairfax is proud of how the program grew, and continues to grow.

*[33:21 min]...“working with the academic units on this model and what it could do and what it could mean for students as well as what it could do for faculty...it was so exciting to see it grow and there were places that it floundered and we learned from those mistakes...but you know that model, doing that level of Freshman programming and the way it was done is something that MSU can be very proud of” [33: 48 min].*