

## **Practically Speaking: Reflections and advice on planning an intercultural faculty exchange**

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**Abstract:** International faculty exchanges offer academics the opportunity to learn from one another, culturally and scholarly. Deciding to participate in a partnership requires a substantial amount of time, planning, trust, and communication. However, the investment is most rewarding and offers the opportunity to develop collaborations and friendships, as well as to develop new scholarship. Using reflective questions, this paper is arranged to offer both those seeking to be future visiting scholars, and those considered to be faculty hosts, practical advice on each stage of the planning process.

**Keywords:** Faculty Exchange, Intercultural, Sabbatical, International Exchange

### **1. Introduction**

Professional development (PD) describes the methods and activities used by some educators and professionals to maintain and enhance their teaching methods, content knowledge, and research agendas (Webster-Wright, A., 2009). Attending conferences, writing scholarly articles, and establishing collaborations with colleagues are strategies engaged by academics in support of their continued PD. Dedicated time to focus on these activities often takes the form of a sabbatical. This article describes a collaborative sabbatical project that involved an intercultural faculty exchange between a Spanish academic and an American academic.

Writing and thinking reflectively about professional experiences for the direct purpose of informing future work is a common method used in PD writing (Jasper, 2013; Spring, H., Kunkel, M., Gilman, I., Henderson, N., & White, J., 2016). It is especially useful when describing collaboration and exchange between educational institutions, as demonstrated by Spring, H. et.al. (2016) in an article on international educational exchange within a library context. This article follows a similar purpose of informing others on the learned benefits of

fostering exchanges and the methods used to nurture collaboration. This article also provides readers with useful information regarding the planning and implementation process of an intercultural faculty exchange.

This article is organized into three sections: pre-planning, arrival, and conclusions. Each section provides the reader with the personal reflections of the faculty-host, and the visiting scholar, as a means of assisting others seeking to gain insight into the logistics involved in developing and facilitating an international academic exchange. The faculty host's responses have been translated from Spanish.

## 2. Pre-planning

Prior to beginning an exchange, a significant amount of thought, research, consideration, and planning is done on both the part of the host scholar and the visiting scholar. This section presents the two perspectives on the pre-planning process; reflective questions were constructed to assist with capturing how this undertaking was carried out. The reflective questions are presented as subheadings to provide clarity and guidance for the reader. Responses have been presented in the narratives of the faculty who participated in this exchange to lend an authentic voice to this cultural and academic experience.

### **Pre-planning Question for Visiting Scholar: How did you identify an institution or colleague to work with in the capacity as a visiting scholar?**

*I knew for my sabbatical I wanted to conduct research and explore new research methodology and work on my Spanish language. Working for an HSI (Hispanic Serving Institution), I take an initiative to find ways to serve and teach with cultural competency. I began my investigation for opportunities for academic exchange by looking for Library Science programs in Spanish speaking countries that also had attached language center programs. Using the Cervantes Institute directory (Instituto Cervantes) assisted me in selecting a language program. Using this method I discovered Complutense University of Madrid's Spanish language partnership courses for international students at the Complutense Center for Spanish (CCEE) and the School of Library and Information Science (Facultad de Ciencias de la Documentación, Departamento de Biblioteconomía y Documentación).*

*I began reading the areas of research interests of the faculty at the School of Library of Information Science and identified, Dra. María Antonia García Moreno . Upon reading her publication list and projects of her research group Biblioteca y Sociedad (BISOC), I decided to write María Antonia and inquire if she and her institution were able to host a visiting scholar. I also mentioned that I was not in need of any financial resource or assistance as my institution was fully funding my sabbatical. María Antonia responded positively to my inquiry and asked me to submit a research plan. I quickly responded with my tentative research plan for my sabbatical and research study.*

*Maria Antonia approved of my research plan and notified me that I would receive an official letter of invitation from the College/department.*

*The summer before my visiting scholar position I visited Madrid to meet with my colleague, search for housing, and visit the CCEE. This was especially helpful because it allowed me an opportunity to meet with Maria Antonia and establish a connection that could not easily be shared through email. I was able to share more about myself beyond my CV and more details about my proposed sabbatical research study and agenda. During this visit with Maria Antonia, she made me feel so welcomed and at ease with my upcoming visiting scholar position.*

**Pre-planning Question Host: What questions/considerations were used to determine whether you/your institution would be able to accept a visiting scholar?**

*In the context of the internationalization of the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM), the School of Library and Information Science, receive undergraduate, graduate and doctoral students every year, as well as professors and foreign researchers, as visitors and / or collaborators. Although the rooms are very diverse, most of them are based on a mobility and exchange agreement between the two universities. This question is important because the first thing that is looked for, before accepting an external visit, is to know if there is an agreement between the two institutions: the hostess and the visitor. When there is an institutional agreement, the student and / or visiting researcher does so as an exchange, which will allow him to use the facilities and services of the university, without having to request another additional permit. Even in some agreements, the universities agree to facilitate the accommodation of the teacher or visiting student. Sánchez-Fernández, M. (2017) highlighted in a recent article the importance of mobility in relation to the internationalization of universities, as well as its impact on the ranking in university rankings and, in the European case, increased by the process of integration in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) of universities.*

*In this specific experience, in which there is no agreement between the two universities, the first questions that were raised were related first, with a personal purpose of helping the foreign researcher, and second, the academic, that is, looking for new ways of exchange of ideas and academic collaboration based on their research, professional and academic profile, and the length of stay. To the extent that the line of research of the visiting professor was related to those of the Biblioteca y Sociedad research group (BiSoc) of the UCM, the academic purpose of the invitation was justified.*

These reflections on the pre-planning processes involved in the initial creation of a partnership between the faculty host and visiting scholar present two distinct methods of assessment. From the perspective of the visiting scholar, there was desire to seek the creation of a partnership for the purpose of learning and experiencing cultural immersion within an academic scope. For that reason, steps were taken to seek both a learning institution and a colleague to learn from and collaborate with. From the perspective of the faculty host, being receptive of a visiting scholar was dependent on the research topic, time of stay in the country, and personal background and qualifications to carry out proposed work.

**Pre-planning - Before Arrival: Once accepted as a visiting scholar, what necessary steps need to be complete prior to arrival to your position?**

*The pre-planning process lasted over a year, from July 2016 - December 2017. This process took nearly a year to plan, apply, and wait for approval. During this time I appraised my colleague in Spain of the process. Upon receiving the news of my acceptance as a visiting scholar at Complutense and tentative language student at the CCEE, I prepared my sabbatical proposal which included a description of research study and plan, tentative course classes, letters of support from peers, approval of time release from supervisors, and final approval of the Chancellor of my college district.*

*Also, during my sabbatical preplanning I researched the visa requirements necessary for staying in Spain beyond three months. I learned that I would need to apply for a "researcher's visa" which was under the title of a "student visa". This required an application that included a letter of invitation from my the Spanish institution, a in person interview to my local Spanish embassy, a fee, proof of Spanish health insurance, and address while in Spain, and necessary financial funds for during my time in Spain.*

*Completing the visa process was probably the most logistically difficult aspect of preparing for my sabbatical. This involved a one day trip to the Spanish Consulate in Los Angeles. I had to first seek time release from my college which required the permission of three administrators, request an appointment at the Consulate, purchase an airline ticket, and coordinate ground transportation. I left my home around 5am in the morning and arrived in Los Angeles at 7am. My appointment at the Consulate was at 11am and when I arrived at the Consulate the door was locked and a sign on that outside stated a general strike was occurring that day. Upon reading this news I fell to my knees as if I had just suffered a blow to the stomach. Many thoughts ran through my head. The first thought I had was that I traveled to another state for an appointment and I would not be able to complete my visa process. The*

*second thought I had was what I was going to report to my supervisors at my college. Before I could begin to panic, a worker appeared and unlocks the door and greeted me. He informed me that there was limited services that day but would try his best to assist me. I was seen immediately and my application was processed. This experience reinforced for me the importance of planning ahead and keeping positive.*

**Pre-planning - Before Arrival: Prior to the arrival of the visiting scholar, what activities/ necessary steps did you have to complete at your institution?**

A summation of pre-planning activities undertaken by the host faculty member included:

- *Request authorization for the invitation to the visiting faculty*
- *Request space for the guest/visiting faculty member*
- *Request authorization to use the services of the host institution*
- *Send an official invitation letter to the visiting faculty*

Coordinating the opportunity to host a visiting scholar requires a significant amount of investment on the part of the host institution and host faculty. From the granting of acceptance, which is used for the government visa process to the institutional permission and allocation of resources. Although the visiting scholar invests time and trust in the host faculty and host institution, ultimately the success of the pre-planning process of the exchange is primarily dependent on the host faculty, host institution, and host country.

### **3. Arrival**

Arrival in the host country marks the official beginning of the exchange. Although communication between the colleagues began over a year prior to the visit, the collaboration and immersion formally commence after the arrival of the visiting scholar at the institution. Described below are the ways in which the two colleagues have assisted in helping to support and foster a positive collaboration.

**Arrival - Collaboration begins: What advice can you offer to support starting off the collaboration on the right path?**

*Keeping in communication is essential; my colleague has been wonderful checking in on me since my arrival in Spain. I had a few hiccups in the beginning with my luggage which went missing for a few days and then catching a cold. During the whole time, my colleague kept checking in on me to see if I needed anything. Also, I really appreciated all the invitations to lunch, coffee, and cultural events happening in and around Madrid. This has been very helpful. Also completely unexpected, my colleague provided me an in-depth tour of the school, made sure I had work space and equipment (computer &*

*printer), and introductions to the college administrators, faculty, and staff. My colleague has shared with me background information regarding the educational environment, culture context and information resources which have supported me in having a successful start to my visit.*

**Arrival - Collaboration begins: What advice can you offer to support starting off the collaboration on the right path?**

From the perspective of the faculty host, the most necessary steps to take to initiate a positive collaboration include :

- *Presentation of the purpose of the stay and the investigation: the project*
- *Search collaboration lines*
- *Establish phases and work schedule*

The activities listed above supported a successful collaboration between the two colleagues. The colleagues have maintained constant communication and the host made herself available to the visiting scholar. The faculty host met with the visiting colleague to discuss the purpose of the stay, and the research investigation, and possible points of collaboration. Also, the host faculty member established meeting times and a work schedule to facilitate collaboration and encourage communication.

#### **4. Conclusions**

At the time of writing this article, the authors have reached the end of the third month of the visiting scholar's residency. The visiting scholar has completed data collection for her study and the colleagues will begin to discuss future work. From the perspective of the visiting scholar, the success of the collaboration has been attributed to the support of her colleague, taking steps to plan in advance the logistics of travel and the visa process, and allotting time for a preliminary visit to establish a collaborative dialogue. From the perspective of the faculty host, when there is no university exchange agreement in place it is important to give consideration to the theme of the visiting scholar's investigation, and how they will participate in the host institution's research group.

There is little literature written on *best practices* for hosting a visiting scholar however, an article written by Xiaowei Zou (2017), a professor from China who was a visiting scholar for a year in the U.S., documents the personal experiences of seven Chinese visiting scholars collaborating with a U.S. institution. In the article *Academic Mobility and Reflection*, Zou offer suggestions to future scholars, and the institutional hosts of visiting scholars. The suggestions for future visiting scholars include communicating ahead of time to host institution your research agenda, practicing language skills, and familiarizing oneself with the "cultural, history, value, and social norms of the

host country”(Zou,2017,p.31). The visiting scholar described in this paper agrees with Zou’s suggestions and adds that a preliminary visit would also assist future visiting scholars in having a positive and successful academic exchange.

To further support communication as well as provide an alternative to conducting a preliminary visit in-person, the faculty host described in this paper suggests considering using free video communication applications such as: Whatsapp, Skype, or Facetime. These free video applications offer an enhanced communication experience that may support clarity in rapport, relationship building and early collaboration. Additionally, these free video communication platforms could also be utilized to assist in evaluating future housing options for the visiting scholar.

In regards to advice for host institutions, Zou suggests providing visiting scholars with “systematic support and assistance, such as offering orientation sessions and regularly addressing visiting scholar-specific issues relating to living, housing, and studying”(Zou,2017,p.32). The authors of this paper agree with Zou’s suggestions, as they describe the support that was provided in their exchange. The faculty host in this academic exchange ensured information and technology resources were prepared prior to the arrival of the scholar as well as, verifying that housing was found. The faculty host quickly established rapport with the visiting scholar through weekly meetings, participating in social and cultural activities, assisting with cultural and institutional muddles, providing information resources pertinent to living in the country, and offering emotionally support.

This brief reflective paper shares the experiences of two colleagues engaged in an international exchange. Traveling to a foreign institution, or hosting a visiting scholar, may not initially appear to require significant pre-planning; however, as demonstrated in this paper, the reality is quite different. Our success in beginning on the “right foot” was the result of an organized planning process. This approach is supported by recommendations found in the literature on academic exchange. Our experiences offer further evidence in support of these recommended best practices for establishing international academic exchanges. Ultimately, the success of the exchange cannot be predetermined, but as this paper demonstrates, there are methods to support those seeking to be recommended practices that may prove to be of assistance.

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