



Council for Christian Colleges and Universities

MIDDLE EAST STUDIES PROGRAM

Amman, Jordan

MARCH 2018 EVALUATION STUDENT ACADEMIC PROGRAMS COMMISSION



*Authored by Dr. Deb Harless
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INTRODUCTION

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A team of three SAPC members visited the Middle East Studies Program (MESP). The team was accompanied by CCCU president Shirley Hoogstra in her first visit to MESP on behalf of the CCCU.

Program director Doug Magnuson, his wife Patti, and program assistant Jessica Mussro prepared a thorough and comprehensive schedule for our visit, with input from Deb Harless, who served as chair for this visit. We were able to observe and experience the core elements of the program, including the academic program, service project sites and site personnel, housing and community life, institute for Arabic language instruction, and connections with the local community. We also had the privilege of interacting with MESP alumni who have made their homes in Jordan.

We were able to experience much of the rhythm of the program, including daily devotions, class time, guest lecturers, meals together at the MESP Center, service projects, interactions with local community members, conversations with MESP alum, and daily life for our students and MESP staff.

PROGRAM MISSION AND HISTORY

MESP Mission Statement: MESP exists to extend the educational mission of CCCU schools by providing a culturally-engaging learning experience in the Middle East that fosters students' growth (conceived holistically as including "personal," "intellectual," "intercultural," and "spiritual" dimensions) and equips them to live out their Christian faith in the world, with a special focus on living out the command to love our neighbor.

In the Middle East Studies Program SAPC Self-Evaluation, Dr. Magnuson offered the following summary of the rich history of MESP:

MESP is celebrating its 25th year this year, having been founded in the fall of 1993 in Cairo, Egypt. The first Director, Cliff (& Marilyn) Gardner, worked with MESP for three years. The second Director, Dr. Richard (& Iris) Cahill, guided and developed MESP from summer 1996 through the spring of 2002 (six years). Dr. David (& Suzanne) Holt, the third Director, began with MESP in the summer of 2002, and led MESP for 11 years, through the spring of 2013. Dr. Holt led the relocation of the program to Jerusalem in the spring semester of 2011, in response to the Egyptian Revolution (they were in Egypt when the Revolution began). The current Director, Dr. Doug Magnuson (along with wife Patti, who is in a three-quarter time role as the Program Administrator), began working with MESP in the fall of 2013 (in Jerusalem). The Gaza War, in the summer of 2014, prompted a decision to move MESP to Amman, Jordan, where Doug and his wife Patti had lived for the 8 years prior to MESP.

I would like to note that MESP has managed to function effectively through various developments and crises which have occurred in the region over the past 25 years – MESP started only 2 years after the Gulf War, and has continued through many ups and downs in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Oslo, the 2nd Intifada, etc.), 9/11 and the second Iraq War (and subsequent deterioration of Iraq), the so-called "Arab Spring" including the Egyptian Revolution, the Syrian War and refugee crisis, the rise of ISIS / "daesh," and more. We are thankful for God's presence and provision over the years, in allowing us to continue in the region and maintain student safety through all of these events.

The years under Dr. Holt were years of expansion, with 30 students per semester (out of as many as 50 applicants), and a staff which came to include an Assistant Director, two Program Interns or Assistants, a Coordinator, and a couple of Arabic professors. After the move to Jerusalem, student numbers began to decline, and MESP began a process of cutting back on staff (and in other ways cutting the budget), to the current level of having a Director, a part-time Program Administrator, and one Program Assistant. (Student numbers seem to have stabilized in the range of 13-18 per semester – starting in the fall of 2013 we have had 18, 15, 11, 8, 17, 13, 18, 15, 12, and now 17 in Spring 2018.)

The move to Jordan has been a good one. Jerusalem, while an interesting setting, was not ideal for MESP's focus on Islam and Arabic, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict had a tendency to overshadow daily life. The move to Amman represents a move back to a setting more representative of the long-term focus of MESP, an Arab-Muslim capital where the majority of people are Muslim and Arabic speakers.

One other development of note – in the spring of our first year in Jordan (2015), we began running a one-month intensive "Summer MESP" (in the month of May) for Pepperdine University, at their request. This has helped stabilize our budget, ensuring that we operate in the black. We have had 15, 18, and 11 Pepperdine students, the past 3 years, and are expecting upwards of 15 this year (p. 7).

1. Observations

It is very clear that the mission of MESP is to provide an outstanding learning experience that extends the holistic learning that is highly valued on our campuses. The mission also embodies an approach to the world that strongly encourages students to live out their Christian convictions and commitments in ways that are anchored in the great commandment of love for God and neighbor. In support of the MESP mission, the program provides rich opportunities for students to learn from people of diverse religious, ethnic, and geographic backgrounds. The program materials reflect an attitude that values learning from others with humility and respect. As our students interacted with guest lecturers, they asked thoughtful questions in a respectful way that demonstrated a desire to think critically about significant and very difficult issues that matter in our world.

2. Commendations

God has blessed the program with strong leaders who have led the program through significant changes over the years. The location changes from Cairo to Jerusalem to the current location in Jordan reflect the program's Middle East context and developments over time throughout the region. The leaders of the program and the CCCU headquarters have been courageous and resourceful in finding good ways forward for the program in the midst of some very challenging circumstances.

The current location in Amman, Jordan provides an outstanding context in which our students can learn about the richness of life in in this part of the world and to develop a fuller understanding of the interconnectedness of the countries in this region of the world as well as the broader global community. It is a setting with significant diversity of religion, ethnicity, and roles for women and men within a primarily Muslim region. This location also affords our students the opportunity to learn about some of the most challenging issues that exist in our world today, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Syrian refugee crisis and its implications worldwide.

The staff has done outstanding work to develop the academic curriculum and co-curricular aspects of

the program in order to make the best use of the Jordanian context to achieve the MESP mission and goals and to further the work of our CCCU campuses.

PROGRAM LEADERSHIP

1. Observations

Dr. Doug Magnuson provides overall academic and programmatic leadership for the MESP program. Dr. Magnuson's academic credentials (Ph.D. in Anthropology) and 30+ years of experience living, teaching, and learning in five Middle Eastern/North African countries have uniquely prepared him to lead this program. Students benefit from Doug's content expertise, deep experience living in numerous Middle East contexts, effective teaching, relational ability, and interpersonal skills.

Patti Magnuson, Doug's wife, supports the program using her gifts of administration, organization, hospitality and encouragement. Patti coaches and mentors students on adjusting to life in the Middle East. She also manages numerous administrative tasks to ensure a smooth running program, including food stipends, travel arrangements, service project locations, and being attentive to any medical or health needs that may arise. Patti has responsibility for organizing and overseeing the students' service work. She has chosen sites that allow our students to be involved in meaningful service and to interact with local Jordanians, and in some cases, refugees. All but one of the sites (i.e., the refugee camp) are operated by Christians who have developed ministries to serve others in need.

The Program Assistant, Jessica Mussro, is a MESP alum and walks alongside our students as they adjust to daily student life in the Middle East. Jessica also assists Patti with the numerous administrative tasks throughout the semester. Her prior experiences as a MESP student and former employee in the study-abroad office at Clemson University have prepared her well for this role.

2. Commendations

Together, Doug, Patti, and Jessica function as a highly effective team.

3. Recommendations

Patti is fully invested in developing relationships with each cohort of MESP students and supporting them throughout the program. It is clear that Patti's role is an integral part of the program and requires more than a part-time position. We are concerned about the amount of funding for administrative support that this program receives. We recommend an increase in funding be allocated for administrative support functions, either to increase Patti's position to full-time or to hire another part-time position.

ACADEMIC AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

The program offers 16-18 credit hours of courses: Beginning Jordanian-Palestinian Colloquial Arabic (4-6 credits); Peoples and Cultures of the Middle East (4 credits); Conflict and Change (4 credits); and Islamic Thought and Practice (4 credits). All students take the same courses which provide a rich environment of shared knowledge as the basis for conversation around course topics and other shared programmatic experiences. (Students who need more credits in language study may choose the six credit Arabic option.). The syllabi are complete with clear learning outcomes, materials, assignments, assessments and expectations.

1. Observations

MESP has a carefully crafted and integrated curriculum built upon an experiential learning cycle of conceptual/theoretical learning, experience, application, and reflection that students recognize as an important part of their learning and the overall program. As the matrix of learning outcomes demonstrates, the learning outcomes are scaffolded across courses, service opportunities, and academic excursions. All of the courses take advantage of local expertise, and several learning activities require students to interact on a regular basis with Jordanians and, in some cases, refugees from the surrounding countries through service projects. The required readings are relevant and current. Students are gaining a fine-grained and nuanced exposure to Jordanian life and the Middle East that allows them to see inter- and intra-cultural, social, economic and political similarities and variation within the region. This is accomplished both through coursework and the academic excursions to Israel, Palestine, Morocco, and Egypt.

The program reflects best practice in the development of intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitude and does it well. Dr. Magnuson utilizes the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), one of the most valid and reliable instruments for assessing the cognitive dimensions of intercultural competency. Each student completes the inventory; he then meets with each one privately to discuss the results and areas for potential growth. He continues to shape the journaling assignments to foster further development of intercultural competencies. Again, as a matter of best practice, students are provided an appropriate balance of support and challenge as they engage an unfamiliar cultural and religious context. While introduced and emphasized in the Peoples and Culture course, intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes are woven and reinforced throughout the curriculum—including devotions—and frame expectations for interactions within the group, local people, guest lecturers and other service providers.

All students are required to participate in a service project once a week while in Amman, allowing them to exercise their Arabic skills, intercultural skills, and spiritual growth through humble service. While the students live together in the same residence, they also have brief immersive home stays during the academic excursion to the Jerusalem and Palestine. However, the home stays are short such that a cultural faux pas or misunderstanding may be forgiven or left unacknowledged in ways that may not provide the opportunities for students to grow in conflict resolution or problem-solving, which are two of the more challenging intercultural skills.

Dr. Magnuson cultivates and reflects the posture of humble learner in all aspects of the program. As a result, students seem to have been able to listen and learn deeply from circumstances that might be very different from their own or with which they disagree.

2. Commendations

The program is to be commended on many dimensions, especially the learning posture of Christian humility that it both fosters and models. The curriculum emphasizes the importance of learning from people rather than merely about them and is well-designed, integrated, and centered on holistic learning. Experiential learning theory and practice permeate the curricular and co-curricular activities. One of the strengths of the service projects is that, in most cases, students are serving alongside Jordanian Christians as colleagues. The intentional and mentored development of intercultural competencies reflects best-practices and is reflected in the IDI post-test results which indicate both statistically significant and practical achievement.

3. Recommendations

The students have many opportunities to negotiate the misunderstandings, conflicts, and challenges

that arise from communal living using the intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes they are acquiring during the program. The program is encouraged to explore possibilities for continuous interaction with the same group of Jordanians outside of service opportunities or transactional interactions such that students have the opportunities to exercise their intercultural competencies in the more challenging circumstances of sustained cross-cultural interaction with the same individuals.

In addition to the work that Dr. Magnuson is already doing to tailor the journal assignments to focus more on intercultural competencies, consider giving students the Individual Development Plan generated by the IDI, so that each can create a personally tailored learning contract designed to move them from their particular initial development orientation toward more interculturally developmental orientations.

To complement the use of the IDI, consider using the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI) which provides a self-assessment of perceptual acuity, personal autonomy, emotional resilience, and flexibility openness as well as providing a systematic way for students to create an intentional and individually-tailored plan to strengthen areas of weakness.

The Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory could also be used to complement the IDI as a tool to provide students insight into the ways in which culture informs preferred approaches to interpersonal conflict and its resolutions. A “critical incident” approach which utilizes J. Daniel Hess’s Action-Reflection-Response model may be a helpful tool for students in the process of cultural learning and adaptation.

We are aware that Dr. Magnuson carries a very heavy instructional load as a part of his responsibilities. We encourage conversation on possibilities for him to share some of that load if he would like.

STUDENT DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNITY LIFE

1. Observations

The student development and community life aspects of MESP are very strong, including the official policies and procedures, shared responsibilities, behavioral expectations, housing, MESP Center, and resources for individual students’ needs. Together, these create a very positive foundation for the program.

The student life policies and procedures are very clear and of the nature and quality that we would expect on our home campuses. The behavioral expectations are also very clear and they set an important tone for how the students will live together in community.

2. Commendations

The MESP Center provides an outstanding facility that promotes learning and the development of community. It is a blessing that the Center provides the space for students and staff to live together in one building, as well as classroom space and informal gathering space. It is clear that the Center is the hub in which students live life together. The Center provides a very safe facility in a safe location. It is located in a building in which the landlord and his family members also live. The landlord is a great resource and support for the program. He takes the safety of our students very seriously -- as if they were part of his own family. He is an important part of the community of support for our students. He is also an important local resource who would be available to help the staff and/or students in the event of an emergency.

The students have been clearly briefed on the societal norms for men and women in Jordan and on how to promote their own safety while living in Amman. Students seem to take seriously how they interface appropriately with others based on gender expectations and how to live respectfully with their Jordanian neighbors. They do this with a generous spirit and cultural humility as they live and learn in Jordan. It was remarkable to see how well the students and staff function as a healthy, supportive, and thriving learning community.

CHRISTIAN FAITH INTEGRATION AND CHRISTIAN FORMATION

Like all BestSemester programs, the MESP staff want students' experiences in the Middle East to prompt them to wrestle with – and therefore deepen – a Christ-centered worldview toward the people, culture, and challenges in the Middle East. For some students, MESP provides the first opportunity to interact with the issues, cultures, and customs of the Middle East region - Islam, studying the Qur'an, or seeing the Palestinian/Israeli conflict from a different perspective. It is within this context that the MESP program weaves faith development and Christian integration throughout students' semester in the Middle East region in several ways.

1. Observations

Regular group devotional and worship time (led by students) provides opportunity to reflect on Scripture together, and to deepen relationships within the cohort. The program staff regularly include integrative concepts and questions that keep a Christian worldview at the center of students' experiences and their responses to them. Since students live and learn in close community for four months, unstructured conversations outside of class or in students' apartments allow for additional reflection.

Service projects (service learning) at various locations around Amman allow our students to "give feet" to loving different others. In addition to providing another lens through which our students experience Jordan, Jordanians, and refugees, service projects also allow students to practice their Arabic.

The program leadership team employs the IDI/IDC as the primary framework for helping students understand and articulate their spiritual development and Christian formation during their MESP experience. While intercultural awareness and development is a goal of all international BestSemester programs, growth in this domain is a primary goal of the MESP program. The IDI assesses this important relational skill, as well as students' cognitive development in this domain over the term. In other words, the IDI/IDC provides MESP students and staff with a tangible way to think about and discuss Jesus' command to "love your neighbor as yourself." This is a significant Christian formation goal of MESP.

2. Commendations

Pre-and post-tests on the IDI/IDC allow students to observe their own intercultural development and allows program staff to quantify each group's intercultural maturation. Collecting both data points allows the MESP and BestSemester program staff to track intercultural progress across cohorts, and to identify progress across the international BestSemester programs. By these measures recent MESP cohorts have demonstrated growth in intercultural competence.

Finally, the end-of-term integration paper for the Islamic Thought and Practice (ITP) course enables students to articulate similarities, differences, and intersections between Christianity and Islam. Students choose one of several prompts to write on; each prompt requires students to articulate a personal response to Islam and Muslims, and/or the Truth claims of the Bible and Qur'an. Students'

questions, responses, journals, classroom interactions, and integrative papers provide evidence of thoughtful interaction and integration with these concepts.

3. Recommendations

Students have identified the need for additional time to process all they are experiencing in the experiential, classroom, travel, and spiritual components of the program. We recommend the program staff identify additional ways to create time and space for structured and/or informal reflection.

PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

1. Observations

The program has a strong assessment strategy utilizing both externally and internally generated assessment tools that addresses the main program components. The program staff regularly close the assessment loop by making changes to the curriculum and other programmatic aspects.

Intercultural Competencies: These are assessed through pre- and post- administration of the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI): The results indicate growth from more monocultural developmental orientations toward more intercultural orientations that is both statistically significant and theoretically and practically meaningful.

Arabic: The Center for Global Education provides the Arabic instruction, and the institute is certified to conduct the ACTFL's Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). The OPI provides the program with a widely used and externally validated measure of language proficiency.

Faith Integration/Knowledge of Islamic Faith and Practice /Jordanian Culture: At the end of the semester, the students write a long final essay that addresses students increased knowledge and personal growth in these areas. Students are provided a rubric with clear guidelines for the evaluation of their achievement of learning objectives. These domains are also assessed at the course level as well. **Student and Alumni Feedback Survey:** Students are sent a survey to gather their feedback on various programmatic and logistical dimensions related to housing, field trips, speakers, etc.

2. Commendations

As mentioned above, one of the great strengths of MESP's assessment strategy is that Dr. Magnuson regularly utilizes the evidence to drive both curricular and co-curricular programming.

3. Recommendations

Though students have the option to pay the Arabic provider for formal OPI results, the program might consider including the cost in the program fee so that official results can be incorporated into program assessment. Even though in the moment students may not see the need for having the formal results, they could very well be useful for them in the future.

PROGRAM HEALTH AND SUSTAINABILITY

1. Observations

MESP is thriving in Jordan. The physical space provides a remarkable place for students to live and learn in Christian community. The program has many strengths including the integrated nature of the curriculum, the high caliber of the staff, and the network of friends of the program that the Magnasons have developed. The program provides a rich experience that is only possible given the strong partnerships that Doug and Patti have developed with local community members. The depth of Patti and Doug's experience in the Middle East, their fluency in Arabic, their ability to build community both with our students and their neighbors, and their strong organizational and administrative skills all contribute to an outstanding program. The program they have added for Pepperdine in the summer helps to make MESP financially sustainable, although it places additional pressure on Patti and Doug after a very full and demanding academic year.

The threats to the program's sustainability lie in the extent to which Amman remains a safe place for our students to live and learn. The current climate in Jordan makes this a very desirable location for the program. The extent to which our CCCU campuses remain committed to sending students to the Middle East to study will have a significant impact on the viability of the program.

As with all of our campuses, enrollment is an ongoing challenge. The health and sustainability of this program rely on the support of our CCCU campuses to advocate for it and to send students. The work of the CCCU to publicize the program and make strong connections with our campuses on its behalf is essential to its success.

2. Recommendations

It may be helpful to identify and better connect a small group of faculty from a handful of campuses to become more invested in MESP, perhaps by inviting faculty to experience it for themselves so that they are better able to advocate for it with their students.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

This is a truly remarkable program. MESP seamlessly integrates a deep love for Christian faith, academic rigor, and service to others which promote the development of skills in reflective listening, and critical thinking, cultural humility, and empathy for others. Doug, Patti, and Jessica provide a strong and positive model of what it means to live the great commandment to love God and one's neighbor. They set a tone for the program that reflects their own deep personal Christian faith and they demonstrate what it means to see all others as person made in the image of God.

The students are challenged to think deeply about their faith. The program fosters increasing depth of understanding one's faith by understanding another faith. We participated in student led devotions during our visit and observed the depth of thinking and reflection that students are doing based on their experiences in the program. The staff has also done a remarkable job of developing relationships with various Jordanian partners that are of great benefit to our students (e.g., guest lecturers, language institute, MESP alum, and local landlord).

This program models how to provide a transformational learning experience that is rooted in faith. The academic excursion to Israel and Palestine has marked the students in profound ways. They continue to

think through what they observed and learned about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from hearing very different perspectives.

The use of the IDI as a tool and framework for helping students to develop cultural competency and humility is an outstanding asset to this program. Doug's expertise in the IDI adds a dimension to this program that sets this program apart as being able to measure the program's impact on students' ability to live and serve effectively with diverse others. While all of our institutions strive to prepare our students to be more culturally competent, we have struggled with how to do that effectively on our campuses. The use of the IDI and the opportunity for students to have meaningful experiences diverse others is instructive for how our campuses can promote cultural competency for all of our students.

Doug and Patti have done exceptional work to create a safe and inviting physical space, develop a rigorous and reflective curriculum, engage students in meaningful community service, and develop a network of local experts, MESP alum, and friends of the program for the benefit of our students. We also affirm the theme in the program, "This is an experience that I refuse to be denied." This encourages our students to explore the richness of Jordanian culture.

The Middle East Studies Program is a remarkable blessing to our students and our campuses. We are grateful for all of the work that Doug, Patti, Jessica and others do to make this exceptional experience possible for our students.