

Award Title

The Unbeaten Path: Considering Global Leadership in the Shadow of the Great Wall

Awards Categories

Athletics, Recreation, Physical Fitness, Non-Varsity Sports and related

Executive Summary

The “Unbeaten Path” is an exciting recreational trip laced with opportunities to develop invaluable perspectives on global leadership. Its purpose is to explore differences in attitudes and values related to leadership, team responsibilities, motivation, and perceptions across cultures. In today’s expanding global marketplace, the most successful leaders will be those who understand cultural differences and are capable of adapting behavior and attitudes appropriately in response to a range of culturally-sensitive situations. Over the four day trip, students had opportunities to explore their leadership capacities as they hiked remote sections of the Great Wall, built rafts with their teammates, learned about harvesting wild vegetables growing in the vicinity of a rural village, and camped among ancient chestnut and peach orchards. Participation in various workshops, campfire storytelling, and sharing of ideas about effective leaders are some of the ways that the trip provided students with an expanded view of life, ideas, and other cultures. The “Unbeaten Path” provides new perspectives on the skills – social, cultural, and professional – required for success in the global marketplace.

Award Description

The uniqueness of “The Unbeaten Path” is not only seen in the content and location of the program, but in the involvement of multiple entities in designing the program. Campus Recreation professionals at Georgia Tech collaborated with staff from the Division of Student Affairs from Georgia Tech and Tianjin University and with GT’s Office Of International Education as well as various groups in Beijing, China.

Twenty-eight Georgia Tech students already studying in Tianjin University met with 12 Tianjin University students at the base of the Great Wall for a 3-day hike along non-renovated sections which wound through small villages and rural areas. The intended outcomes of the experience were to develop multicultural competencies, global leadership capabilities, build appreciation for the assets each culture brings without losing sight of fundamental differences, and looking beyond superficial differences were successfully woven into a curriculum of activities, journaling, and discussions.

Prior to the event, participants viewed a video recorded by Economist Martin Jacques, author of Understanding the Rise of China, at the following link:
http://www.ted.com/talks/martin_jacques_understanding_the_rise_of_china.html

In the video, Martin Jacques asks: How do we in the West make sense of China and its phenomenal rise? He examines why the West often puzzles over the growing power of the

Chinese economy, and offers three building blocks for understanding what China is and will become.

The video dovetails nicely with the statement that the first step to developing intercultural competence is to “look beyond the superficial.” In the 21-minute video, Jacques stresses the importance of understanding China’s historical and cultural contexts. The video neatly identifies and provides examples of meaningful differences between China and the West.

Against the backdrop of this video, observations and discussions as part of the “Unbeaten Path” experience is anchored in more easily defined specifics.

In developing the curriculum, the designers relied on the following concepts:

Successful leadership in the global marketplace requires:

- Intercultural competence in both the international marketplace and the domestic workplace
- Understanding of geo-political climate
- Grasp of legal parameters

21st Century Challenges for Organizations:

- Changing demographics
- Diverse & inclusive work environments
- Demand to globalize product offerings
- Safety within global operations
- How to select & prepare workers for international assignments
- Developing global leadership capabilities
- Facilitating mergers and acquisitions

Individuals face challenges like these:

- Cross-cultural manager – employee relationships
- Cooperative relations between key executives and co-workers who may work in widely disparate geographical and cultural regions
- Motivating culturally-diverse workers towards greater effectiveness & efficiency
- Successful leadership of a diverse workforce

Intercultural Competency: What is it? Intercultural competence is the capacity to recognize and understand cultural differences and commonalities and to adapt one’s behavior in culturally appropriate ways. It is a mutual adaptation of behaviors and perspectives. It reflects the degree to which differences (values, expectations, beliefs, practices) are bridged and an inclusive environment is achieved by approaching differences from a mutually respectful perspective. Ultimately, the goal of becoming an inter-culturally competent leader is to facilitate higher performance, learning, and personal growth among diverse groups.

The four-day/three-night program began with students from Georgia Tech and Tianjin University and four GT facilitators (including the VP of Student Affairs and the Director of the Leadership Development, coming together in an opening session. The content consisted of various ice-

breaker activities, details about logistics, discussions about personal styles (True Colors), and successfully established the deeper context for the Unbeaten Path experience.

Students were strategically placed in groups (4) to ensure a healthy dialog between American students and Chinese students on a wide range of formal and sometimes informal topics.

Beginning the following morning and continuing the next three days, the four groups hiked along remote sections of the Great Wall, stopping to eat and explore life in a rural village and enjoying the striking natural scenery. Students camped with their small group of 10-12 in primitive areas where they engaged in various activities structured to direct focus on specific learning objectives.

John Dewey, American philosopher, once said, “We don’t learn from experience, we learn from thinking about experience.” With this in mind, facilitators helped participants to “interpret” their experience into meaningful conclusions, through following a basic line of debriefing: 1. discussing the details of each person’s experience; 2. drawing conclusions about that experience in relation to inter-cultural understanding and competence; and 3. planning more effective behavior for the future. Throughout each leg of the program, facilitators continued the dialog about cultural issues by asking pointed questions, both informally such as questions posed to small groups as they hiked, and in more structured manner such as when the group was assembled around a campfire in the evening. Discussions revolved around questions like: “What does this mean to you as you prepare to be a successful global citizen?” and “Reflect on the differences in lifestyles between American and Chinese citizens.”

Imbedded in conversations were exercises that were intended to create opportunities for targeted discussions. These included activities like Trust Pairs, Vision Walk, Bull Ring Challenge, Leadership Squares, and Raft Building. Each was followed by a reflective component and opportunities to share conclusions.

The relevance of the curriculum falls directly in line with one of the five goals in Georgia Tech’s Strategic Plan: “Expand our global footprint and influence to ensure that we are graduating good global citizens.” With over 50% of Georgia Tech having at least one semester of study-abroad experience, the “Unbeaten Path” is a sustainable program that fits nicely into the direction our campus administration is taking us. The concept and success of providing global leadership opportunities in conjunction with both our Study Abroad Program and Office of International Education provides not only a wonderful learning opportunity for our students studying abroad in China, but it also opens doors for expanding our footprint with study abroad programs throughout the world.

Assessment Data

“The Unbeaten Path” is guided by specific learning outcomes that merge both theory and our institution’s and department’s strategic plan:

- Understand basic differences in personal styles based on a simple 4-style model: (Team, Task, Vision, and Action)
- Articulate their preferred style in terms of how they contribute to group performance as well as

how persons with differing styles might perceive them

- Understand how differences can simultaneously strengthen a group and be the source of conflict
- Identify significant experiences and people in their lives (real, fictional, historical) that have shaped their understanding of leadership
- Explore culturally-specific attitudes towards leadership, success motivators, and approaches to working collectively
- Identify a leadership skill (or skills) they are committed to developing
- State how cultural norms impact decision-making and ways we communicate
- Articulate key differences in how cultures interact and lead

A Likert-scale survey as well as open-ended responses demonstrate overwhelming support of the program by both Georgia Tech and Tianjin University students:

- 100% stated this was worth their time and money
- 96% claimed it met their expectations
- 97% rated their experience as either Excellent or Good
- 83% either Strongly Agree or Agree that they are better prepared to recognize meaningful cultural differences and commonalities
- 93% either Strongly Agree or Agree that they had a meaningful connection with at least one student from another country
- 82% either Strongly Agree or Agree that they have at least one concrete idea about what they need to do to become more inter-culturally competent
- 90% either Strongly Agree or Agree that The “Unbeaten Path” will most likely be one of the most influential parts of their study abroad experience
- 100% would recommend this experience (or a similar one) to other students

What made this experience meaningful to you?

- “The opportunity to explore a rarely seen part of the Great Wall and to meet and become friends with students from a totally different culture”
- “Hiking with TJU students, talking about cultural differences and leadership, challenging myself, learning to break down barriers with other people”
- “The experience is meaningful because as a Chinese, I never had a chance to go to the Great Wall when I was in China. Now being able to hike through the Ming Dynasty's unrenovated Great Wall gave me a feeling of great accomplishment. Through the trip, I understand the importance of teamwork. Each member in my trip help me through all the difficulties as I had fallen so many times. We help each other on tents, hiking, and carrying stuffs”

How might this experience impact your perception of and interactions with other cultures in the future?

- “Before you judge another group, make sure you understand their history and their background. In the end, we will always find culture difference is just a thin wall between different races. The wall can be broken and we will find that everyone is the same, just human”

- “We have many ideas in common. It’s not a difficult stuff at all to talk with an American. I enjoy that and looking forward for further interaction?

What would you say to a student who was trying to decide whether or not to go on this trip next year?

- “Go for it. It’s worth every penny and every minute you spend. It makes you a new you”
- “Go. Try something new. If nothing else, it was one of the most incredible and awe-inspiring places I have ever been”
- “This is probably one of the most memorable experiences I’ll ever have in my life. I never thought I could ever have as much fun as I had in the three days that I spent by and on the Great Wall meeting new people and getting to a conversational level with local students. It was undoubtedly an eye-opening experience to Chinese culture that I think every CSP student should have”
- “This is a unique experience because it has all in one. You have the chance to camp under the stars near the Great Wall, have a campfire to sing along to and participate in challenging activities you would never thought you would do. You exercise by walking on the Great Wall while chatting with people that are completely different than you and are curious about your daily life back home. It is an exchange of stories that makes you see thoughts from the other side of the world”

Like all new programs, the program administrators will use the data to make modifications for enhancement. For example, some suggestions were to increase the length of the trip, which would provide even further discussion (scope and depth). It is our intent to use those who went on the trip as resources for not only modification of this trip but future trips with similar learning objectives.