VISAGE: Vanderbilt Initiative for Scholarship and Global Engagement

“As with any environment of intellectual challenge, I have come back from our service learning in South Africa with more questions than answers. As articulated through our lecture with Charles Villa-Vincencio, Executive Director of South Africa’s Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, and former Research Director of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the hardest concept to translate into a political framework has now become the most important one for South Africa. This concept of course is justice, justice that is still demanded by millions of people who remain economically and politically disenfranchised from the promise of a sustainable lifestyle.”

- VISAGE student participating in the Cape Town, South Africa program

Vision

Vanderbilt University is fundamentally dedicated to educating students as global citizens. As an institution of higher education, we define our success by the educational opportunities we provide students to grow in this capacity. It has become increasingly clear that those opportunities must engage students beyond national borders. To that end, our university has developed the Vanderbilt Initiative for Scholarship and Global Engagement (VISAGE), an innovative program where students from any discipline can participate in an experiential education program that combines service and academic study in an international setting.

VISAGE was launched in 2007 and was preceded by two years of research and planning by the VISAGE curriculum committee. The creation of VISAGE was a result of several key units collaborating to develop a comprehensive international program. These units include the Vanderbilt International Office, Global Education Office, Office of the Dean of Students, Office of Active Citizenship and Service, Center for Teaching, Center for Ethics, and faculty members from all undergraduate schools.

Description

The VISAGE program consists of three learning modules:

(1) 3-credit Global Citizenship course in the spring that provides students with a comprehensive overview of the course topic using the backdrop of the historical, cultural, economic and social framework of the country of fieldwork.

- Students from all disciplines (education, engineering and arts and science) participate in joint class sessions throughout the semester led by a separate faculty member representing each of the disciplines presenting students with a unique interdisciplinary perspective of global issues.

(2) 1-3 credit Global Fieldwork course for four weeks during the summer where students participate in lectures from local community members, government representatives and partner university faculty and perform 15 to 25 hours on average of service within the community with a local partner. The summer service or field-based experience addresses a specific local need articulated by the international community partners:

- In South Africa, students worked with SHAWCO (Students’ Health and Welfare Center Organization), a student run nonprofit organization based at the University of Cape Town to provide women and children with computer literacy courses and develop an afterschool tutoring program.

- In Nicaragua, students worked with MANNA Project International at sites in the communities of Cedro Galan, Chiquilistagua, and La Chureca to provide English classes, computer literacy lessons and a dance/exercise class. Students also worked at Tesoros de Dios, a school for children with special needs.

- In Melbourne, students worked with Conservation Volunteers Australia, the Center for Education and Research in Environmental Strategies (CERES) and the National Resources Conservation League on several projects including the construction of a water tank to capture rainfall and the restoration of vegetation indigenous to the area.

(3) 3-credit Global Citizenship, Service, and Research seminar in the fall where students participate in guided research on a topic of interest related to the global fieldwork or service.
While each course focuses on a particular topic, they all share the common themes of Global Citizenship, Social Justice, and Sustainable Development. In each of the three modules, students integrate course concepts and scholarly readings with service experiences through critical reflection activities.

The programs for 2008 were *Education, Social Cohesion and Economic Development in South Africa; Water Resource Management and Sustainable Development in Australia; and Family, Community and Social Justice in Nicaragua.* VISAGE will expand to four programs in 2009, with the addition of a program site in Costa Rica focusing on *Eco-tourism, Civic Engagement, and Corporate Social Responsibility.*

**Impact**

*Increasing Access to Study Abroad*

While some Vanderbilt students have traditionally been limited in their study abroad options due to academic credit constraints, VISAGE structures its curriculum to facilitate increased access to study abroad opportunities for any 1st-3rd year student in any discipline. The program provides a replicable, sustainable infrastructure for courses from any academic discipline wherein topics of import to local and international partners are explored through academic exchange and collaborative experiential opportunities within domestic and foreign communities. Vanderbilt’s School of Engineering and Peabody’s College of Education were particularly targeted for the VISAGE program due to their traditionally small participation in study abroad. One of the program sites - *Sustainable Water Resource Development in Australia* – was specifically designed to provide direct credit for the Engineering curricula. The flexible structure of VISAGE provides additional opportunities for students who may not have chosen to go abroad during a semester to have a comprehensive international academic experience as part of their Vanderbilt career. Students in the first VISAGE cohort represented the junior and sophomore classes equally, with first-year students close behind. Twenty-four percent of the 2008 participants are members of underrepresented groups in study abroad.

*Strengthening Service Opportunities*

VISAGE builds on student interest in civic engagement by integrating service into the academic curriculum during all three modules. VISAGE students contributed approximately 5850 hours of service in Nashville in spring 2008 and close to 2050 hours of volunteer time during the summer modules. Vanderbilt’s long commitment to service also provides unique opportunities to further develop existing partnerships, such as the Vanderbilt initiated Manna Project International in Managua, Nicaragua, for the VISAGE program.

*Creation of Sustainable Partnerships*

The partnerships formed with community organizations abroad were developed with the potential to become long-term partners for VISAGE and Vanderbilt as a whole. VISAGE draws upon resources established by Vanderbilt’s *Core Partner Strategy*, which contributes to the sustainability of global partnerships. Core partnerships with institutions like the University of Cape Town and the University of Melbourne were essential in developing local relationships organizations such as SHAWCO in South Africa, and CERES in Australia that will allow for growth and change over time. Sustainable local partnerships are the key to the continued success and growth of the VISAGE program. The topics covered in VISAGE courses may change but our goal is for the community partnerships to remain constant so that we have a meaningful impact in the places where students are engaged in service.

*Internationalization of the Campus*

Through grants and collaborations with Vanderbilt departments and centers, VISAGE is able to promote on-campus initiatives relating to issues of global citizenship, sustainability and social justice. A grant given by Vanderbilt’s Center for Ethics allows VISAGE to bring in experts to speak on each of these three overarching themes. Events are open to the greater Vanderbilt and Nashville community. The VISAGE program has led to the creation of more international courses enhancing the overall curriculum, specifically in the underrepresented School of Engineering and College of Education. Likewise, the program has encouraged greater faculty engagement with international initiatives campus and departmental involvement in study abroad.
**Outcomes and Assessment**

Personal statement coding, reflective self-assessment letters, pre-and post-experience surveys, student blogs/journals and research papers are used to gather data on the impact of the VISAGE modules. Students' personal statements, categorized as academic, personal, community-based, or other, helped VISAGE leaders conceptualize students' initial program expectations.

Comparing and contrasting survey responses from Modules I and II has provided interesting implications for the ongoing development of VISAGE. Students report that the program has challenged their preconceptions regarding global citizenship, social justice, and/or sustainability and enhanced their overall educational development. These results seem to confirm that the experiential nature of the program's summer abroad component remains critical in truly maximizing student engagement and learning.

In addition to specific data gathering, participants are also required to maintain a program-specific blog about their abroad summer experience. Students follow a scheduled template of discussion questions to guide reflection on their experience and integrate the learning done through service with their academic coursework. A sample from a student’s blog in Australia reads: “Being immersed in the country and talking to the people there makes a large difference. In particular, I learned a lot more about aboriginal culture and history by participating in the activities related to them on this trip than I did when I researched aboriginal people for a paper I wrote last semester. There is a lot more to be learned from the actual people themselves than there is in books about them.”

In the third module of the program students participate in a research seminar in which they explore a topic related to their global fieldwork. Sample topics include *HIV Aids Education among Adolescent teens in South Africa*, *Understanding Democratic Participation in Nicaragua* and *Public and Private Ownership of Water Resources Infrastructure*.

**Resources**

VISAGE garners financial support from student tuition, institutional support from the Provost’s Office in the form of summer study stipends and external private donor support through the Nichol’s Humanitarian Fund. For the 2008 student cohort, 39% received financial support through the Nichol’s Humanitarian Fund while 18% obtained funding through other types of institutional aid. The success of the initial VISAGE cohort led to an examination of the potential impact of short-term programming. The administration has recently committed to allocating additional resources towards scholarships for short-term study abroad programs in the summer. Staff support is provided by the Vanderbilt International Office, the Global Education Office and the Center for Teaching. Faculty support is provided by the College of Arts and Science, School of Engineering and the Peabody College for Education and Human Development.

**Conclusion**

Continuing to consider the ways in which higher education institutions can best prepare students for global citizenship, the Vanderbilt Initiative for Scholarship and Global Engagement (VISAGE) program provides a model for international civic engagement through innovative academic and experiential learning abroad. VISAGE has the strong backing of Vanderbilt’s chancellor, provost, deans, key faculty, and an engaged student body. It capitalizes on an enthusiastic commitment to the university’s internationalization strategy; greater student access to study abroad; a tradition of high-quality and innovative learning endeavors; and a dedication to global citizenship and service at individual and institutional levels. Finally, continual collaboration with global and local partners will continue to strengthen Vanderbilt’s internationalization goals and objectives. It is our hope that VISAGE provides international educators with a new paradigm from which to actively engage students in the process of realizing what global citizenship and academic scholarship truly encompass in today’s dynamic society.