

What to Learn from a Tale of Building a “Campus” and Academic Program in Italy

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Some five years ago, I was invited to serve as the founding Program Director of what would soon become the Assumption College Rome Program. The opportunity of changing my decades-long teaching routine was nothing short of inviting as I entertained grand visions of sipping *espresso* and discussing art and politics in what would quickly become my local café, while quietly and efficiently teaching one course and attending to the manageable affairs of our study abroad program and its students.

My knowledge of Italian made me the administration’s candidate of choice when the time came to recruit a director, a position that I eventually accepted without a clear understanding of the requisite skills. My work quickly began, and with the passing days I learned that the countless hours I had spent in the classroom had done little to prepare me for the reality of program-building and the grueling administrative work that lay before me. We eventually opened the doors of our Rome Campus to a cohort of seven eager students now affectionately known as the “pioneers”. On that day, the superior general of the Augustinians of the Assumption, the College’s founding Congregation, bestowed a solemn blessing upon both the pioneers and Villino Dufault, the multi-purpose building that would become the center of academic and residential life in a sleepy neighborhood just outside the city’s historic center.

Blessings were indeed in order, as the creation of Assumption College’s academic facility and program came into being all too quickly. In less than a year we had managed not only to completely renovate and retrofit an aging building but also to build what would become a signature program for our Catholic liberal arts college. Meeting the goal of opening

our doors in such a short period of time was indeed astonishing, and the Rome pioneers and staff auspiciously embraced both the Spartan facilities and our tendency to improvise everything from class meetings to dining services. Despite the great strides we had made, there was still a tremendous amount of work to do and even more to be learned.

Our semester-long programs now operate at capacity just five years removed from the opening of our facility, which is now well equipped and comfortable. The benefits of our presence have been numerous for several stakeholders and have indeed exceeded the expectations of many, among them the most ardent architects of the initiative. The Congregation has profited from the partnership while the College has met several strategic goals, among them the enhancement of its curricular offerings. If you include the immediate uptick in our national ranking as well as the unique development opportunities that our presence in Rome has offered to the faculty, then the rewards appear to greatly outweigh the shortcomings, but establishing a physical presence in a foreign country and building academic programs around it are not easy tasks.

The Rome pioneers have since completed their undergraduate degrees, and evidence suggests that their no-frills experience was as rewarding as that of the more than 100 students that have succeeded them. My time on the frontlines in Rome also came to an end after a two-year commitment during which the foundational cornerstone was set. Our study-abroad facility and programs have indeed come a long way.

I am often asked if the experience has been worthwhile. My decision to continue involvement in the development of our Rome Campus, at which I have been involved in different capacities, might be better explained by the anointment with the holy water on that special day along with my wife, my two-month-old son, my Italian in-laws, college staff, students and members of the Congregation. In retrospect, as I ponder the countless legal, fiscal and practical obstacles that continue to surface with astounding regularity, the successful inauguration and the rapid subsequent growth of our semester-long programs seem as miraculous as my psychological well-being and the overall happiness of my marriage and

family life in the wake of what has been an extraordinarily taxing personal and professional commitment.

I had never imagined that I would transition mid-career from my position as Associate Professor of Italian to one of the key players in building the college's signature academic program in Italy. Fortunately, I am no stranger to on-the-job training, although I am convinced that the task would have been challenging for even a highly skilled individual with years of experience.

Those hesitant to believe in miracles might be more inclined to attribute the success of our Herculean efforts to unwavering institutional support and fervid collaboration among several key constituents, above all the highly dedicated members of the home institution ranging from sympathetic faculty advisors to high-level administrators and trustees. Uniting key stakeholders is critical to the success of international expansion, especially at a time in which the traditional notions concerning study abroad and its inherent value appear to be shifting.

All indications are that the college has met its short-term goals, but we are in it for the long haul. Whether you believe in the force of miracles, in the power of hard work, or in both, the decision to build a study-abroad program necessitates a great deal of forethought and discussion, which are as essential as the startup funds.

Strategic goals must be well formulated with a clear understanding of the potential return on what amounts to a significant investment of finances and resources, especially for a tuition-dependent institution with a modest endowment. In the midst of increasing competition in the shrinking market of Catholic liberal arts colleges, resources will also undoubtedly amount to the hidden potential of faculty and staff, like me, whose workloads in the areas of teaching and service are already bursting at the seams.

Before asking if you and your institution are prepared to expand internationally, be it in Italy or elsewhere, you would be wise to elaborate a detailed strategic plan and a conservative budget. In Italy, for example, I recommend compiling a list from A to Z including even the most intricate

detail in the planning stage of your project, and once you have formulated a pro-forma budget, be sure to multiply projected costs by at least 1.5 to absorb the Byzantine underlying costs associated with doing business there.

Nonetheless, for every dotted I and crossed T that go into planning and projection, the Ps and Qs that bear continuous minding are many more than those of the upper- and lower-case variety; manifold and mysterious – and often arriving at the most inopportune moments – they range from the Procedures for registering students and staff for the Italian *Permesso di soggiorno* (permit of stay) at the local *Questura* (the Italian Police headquarters) to the Quizzical new Protocol for the removal of grease from your facility’s kitchen.

An ability to mitigate various cultural differences is absolutely crucial to the success of any venture in a foreign land, especially a long-term academic program that involves the hiring of personnel abroad, the reliance on specific services, the necessity of effective property management, etc. The Italian alphabet and language provide particularly apt metaphors that underscore the divide existing between the common practices and general ethos in the realm of American higher education and the shared customs and mindset of Italians. While the English alphabet consists of 27 characters, the Italian one includes only 21, but the presumption that the highly phonetic nature of the Italian language might reflect a similar straightforwardness in practical affairs will dash hopes of clarity and ease even further.

The apparent concision and neatly foundational nature of Italian is illusory at best, and I have a strong suspicion that Cyrillic, Arabic, and Chinese scripts and their corresponding languages conceal similar obscurities and ironies that could cause a hiccup or two when creating an international startup. Italians, nonetheless, manage to accomplish a great deal despite a plethora of rules and regulations in the workplace and in society at large. The way in which Italians thrive offers a lesson that I eventually learned, one that we must also impart to our students so that they may gain the most of their time in Italy.

The first step towards overcoming the inherent intricacies of doing

business in Italy is to peacefully resign yourself to the beautiful confusion that is Italian bureaucracy, taking heart, above all, that standing behind the ubiquitous rolls and reams of green-white-and-red tape are battle-tested individuals who, for the most part, will help you find your way.

This *regola d'oro* of Italian life will go a long way towards overcoming the vicissitudes that lie ahead while also offering a much greater general lesson; I remain convinced that this rule is applicable in virtually every corner of the globe. Networking on all levels, therefore, becomes an important next step. In our case (and in that of most every other successful program in Italy), affiliation with the Association of American College and University Programs in Italy (AACUPI) has been a vital part of our development and success. As AACUPI President Portia Prebys aptly points out in reference to the association's continued involvement in advancing the interests of its members in the areas of fiscal and legal management, "a new arrival [in Italy] would be hard-pressed to find particular niche legislation to follow without AACUPI's guiding hand and collective experience." Similar associations exist in other popular host countries, such as AASAPUK in the United Kingdom, APUNE in Spain, and AUCS in Switzerland, to name only a few.

While membership in a representative association is paramount within the grand scheme, let's not underestimate the importance of becoming a part of the local economy. Getting to know the Marcos, the Stefanias, and the Gianfrancos behind hitherto nameless faces has gone a long way towards making treacherous waters more navigable. And learning to regularly use such key terms as *buongiorno*, *grazie*, and *arrivederci*, while displaying *un bel sorriso*, has helped turn my odyssey into a more enjoyable experience.

It takes dedicated individuals to build a program and meet important institutional goals. However, if you were called on to serve, what would be in it for you? It took me a great deal of time to realize my visions of sipping *caffé espresso* in pleasant company, sometimes with Lorenzo, the technician with whom I would discuss the functionality of our building's HVAC system, or with Carolina, the director of our part-

nering language school in Rome, who would offer reports on the progress of our students. Each fortuitously happens to share an interest in art and politics, which ultimately has helped make my continued work and commitment worthwhile.