Bridging the GAPP

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Abstract

The German American Partnership Program (GAPP) is a short-term high school student exchange program that provides students from both countries to gain perspectives from alternative culture exchanges. The GAPP program is not a school sponsored club or organization. This service-learning project involves assisting coordinators by creating resources to educate individuals regarding cultural and language opportunities and provides support to an already overburdened education staff. Communicating expectations and cultural information allows students to travel safely and remain open to new perspectives.

Keywords: German American Partnership Program (GAPP), Student Exchange, Language, Informal Learning
Capstone Introduction

Early life experiences of mine demonstrated the benefit of learning from different cultures and not being afraid to try something new. I had the opportunity to learn a language at the Defense Language Institute (DLI) in Monterey, California while serving in the U. S. Army. After graduating from the institute, I spent three years living in Panama, Central America immersing myself into their language and culture. Because of these experiences, it became important to me to encourage others to widen their cultural experiences and foster understanding and acceptance of diversities. This capstone project became the perfect medium to reach out to contacts within the Boise School District to a friend that coordinates trips for students through the German American Partnership Program (GAPP). Collaborating with Borah and Boise High Schools to encourage students to widen their perspectives and embrace a new culture in an informal learning setting.

The German American Partnership Program (GAPP) is a resource for high school students to travel on a short-term exchange, typically two to three weeks, with a partner community in Germany. “Schools from over 30 states across the United States have students traveling during the 2023 GAPP year,” (Goethe Institut, 2023). During the time abroad, students spend time with host families learning cultural activities and typical daily activities in Germany. The student attends the local host school learning along with other German peers their own age. Later in the year, the host community from Germany sends students to the United States to exchange their home perspectives with their host peers. “GAPP provides intercultural encounters for students to enhance language proficiency in an informal setting,” (German Missions in the United States, 2023).
This capstone project involved creating resources for students to prepare for the high school student adventures overseas. Trip preparation takes months of planning and involves high levels of communication between students, parents, and instructors that chaperon the trip. What is most important is highlighting what can be expected culturally overseas because, for young, inexperienced adults, this can be something of a shock. Resources enable students to be prepared and navigate their host communities safely and limit uncomfortable or embarrassing situations. To ensure their comfort and safety, resources will present cultural, logistical, and safety information on an approved district platform, Google Documents and Sites.

An initial survey was created and distributed to students that attended the 2022/2023 GAPP trip. Program leadership ensured the information was necessary, helpful, and included student feedback to ensure a peer-to-peer viewpoint with the stakeholders and audience. Next there was a meeting regarding the next program excursion for interested participants and their parents where information was discussed. I gathered information regarding what was important to participants considering the program and what would be key to include in the resources. This data was used to create a Google Site that included key points gathered from the survey and stakeholder meetings. The site was then provided to the GAPP coordinators, evaluated, and set to launch within the Boise and Borah High School language program.

Converging Elements

Innovative Approach

Bringing together perspectives from different cultures and fostering collaboration is the key motivator for this project. “Studying abroad isn’t merely about academic pursuits; it’s also a chance to broaden your cultural understanding and become a global citizen.” (Great Learning, 2023, June 26). Demonstrating to students that informal learning can be enjoyable and connect
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with students from other cultures encourages them to seek connections in diverse environments. Working with peers and learning the culture and language from their viewpoint encourages learning in a natural, informal setting. Varying approaches need to be taken to encourage different types of students to engage in activities that are outside of their comfort zones.

During the capstone process, the information format was changed and innovated to meet the needs of the student and parent audiences. Utilizing a Google Site format rather than physical paper copies, information can be distributed when and where the coordinators require it to be sent. This enables easily accessible information for parents as typically information from school to home tends to get lost or miscomprehended. Online GAPP sources were searched for helpful material that provided a comprehensive view of GAPP as well as providing examples of how other groups have formatted their ideas. Testimonials and reviews by other GAPP groups provided clear expectations for students. Bringing information from multiple sources and adapting that data for the intended audience orchestrated an original final product.

**Emotional Intelligence**

Considering the emotional intelligence of my audience was a concern from the beginning of this project. The target audience (high school students) are from a different generation and I am old enough to be their grandparent. They may not see things from the same perspectives as I do and may be going through tough times in their lives. Students of all ages become so wrapped up in formal learning that they start to remove themselves from learning new perspectives because it can be overwhelming and exhausting. Providing resources that involve their peers will encourage students to seek fun, new experiences and teaches them that the world has so much to offer. “Studying abroad isn’t merely about academic pursuits; it’s also a chance to broaden your cultural understanding and become a global citizen,” (Great Learning, 2023, June 26).
Providing a platform where students learn the benefits of social awareness and relationship management can remove uncomfortable feelings that may deter individuals from reaching out beyond their personal and social spheres. Engaging emotional intelligence while working on the capstone project allowed me to better analyze the situation and which viewpoints to include within the resources. Presenting what they may need, rather than what I believed they would need, may ensure greater success in persuading participation. If I encourage just one student to take a chance to learn something new, my project will be a success.

**Creative Thinking**

A creative framework is a process in finding a solution to a challenge or dilemma. It requires thinking outside the constraints of what everyone else has done and seeking the best option. The biggest creative challenge was the format and media for the student and parent resources. Initially, the formatting choices were between forms, slides, or a website and after discussing with the coordinator, a website was selected as the best option. Website creation was not my area of expertise and I required studying outside of the course to learn basic web development skills. It was also important to make sure I met the school’s internal guidelines as well as meeting the needs of the stakeholders.

An important part of my creative framework is empathy towards how students would feel encountering new cultures while living with a host family. The informal learning process provides a lower stress environment for new viewpoints. Part of that process was getting feedback from students that have been on previous trips and gathering their insight. This peer viewpoint was incorporated within the resources to make sure that the audience’s needs are addressed. Personal and social identification also plays into the individual needs of the student audience. Creating the capstone resource website as a non-student, non-parent, non-teacher also
Bridging The GAPP provides an outside, third-party perspective so materials do not come across to students as a lesson plan or house rules.

**Your Innovative Solution**

From the start of the capstone process I sought innovative ways in which I could arrange influence, create something new, or provide an unexploited solution. This project necessitated the most creativity and allowed me to set outside of my professional and personal spheres to support a social program that I hold in high regard. Initially, I wanted to simply create resource materials for the GAPP program coordinators to allow them to focus on other student academic requirements. Through the stakeholder information gathering process we decided that a website was the most useful for students and parents so they could research at their leisure while also providing a flexible format that allowed future updates. An online medium reduced the dissemination of paper copies that students may stuff in backpacks and forget or discard completely.

The final capstone solution is innovative compared to examples presented by other groups across the nation. The Borah and Boise High School GAPP group will receive the most benefit by using the Google Site platform that fits their lesson structure. Creating Google resources allows both schools to have up to date, shareable, and attractive documents. Previously, one teacher would create/update the materials and then email the updates to the other instructor. The back-and-forth exchange of information can be confusing and time consuming. Resources provided through this project are a benefit to recruitment and communication between all involved participants.
Results

A student survey was initially created to gather information from students that participated in the 2023 GAPP trip. Out of twenty-five surveys, three surveys were returned, which was very disappointing. Since the first online survey did not provide the number of returns anticipated, it was necessary to eliminate the second results survey. Since timely feedback was required for this project, switching to a stakeholder final review seemed the best option. Diana Steiner reviewed the Google Site and linked forms created for the Boise/Borah GAPP. She mentioned that families require a lot of information prior to making the decision to participate in the program and was happy that they could direct parents to this site rather than having them shuffle through the teacher pages which can be difficult to navigate (D. Steiner, personal communication, November 29, 2023).

Stakeholders benefit by having a singular, online resource for both students and parents to learn more about GAPP. The more learned about the program, the less fear and hesitation students may have regarding travel and homestay in Germany. Survey information indicated that students are mostly concerned about local transportation in Germany and missing their family back home in the United States. Feedback from the coordinator suggested adding information regarding table manners and tipping at local restaurants to eliminate any embarrassment that students may encounter in public. By addressing these items in advance and explaining planned events, students will feel comfortable traveling and have less fear interacting in foreign social settings.

Coordinators are already discussing ways of integrating next year’s financial grant and calendar data to the site. Becoming a part of this process has been an honor and I look forward to assisting them with further updates as GAPP progresses each year. Their excitement in having an
additional resource available to make the GAPP process smoother demonstrates the success of my efforts. There is a future to the project and it has become a tool that can be utilized, adjusted, and grown over time.

**Conclusion**

When selecting a capstone project for this course, I always believed that a service-learning project would be my method of choice. Utilizing skills developed over the past year and half within the Interdisciplinary Professional Studies and Business programs to create something of value for others was my goal. Now that the course is ending and the project is complete, I feel I have done just that. A benefit to the project was working to encourage others to learn more about other cultures and experience things outside of their comfort zones. Adding the benefit of ease of access and the flexibility for coordinators to communicate effectively with students and parents was accomplished by the Google Site created.

There were instances along the way where I would have changed aspects of the project. I should have anticipated that students would be less inclined to respond to online surveys but felt peer-to-peer input was important. Setting out a project timeline or workflow process that had finer details regarding development steps would have helped me not to miss smaller details along the way. Sharper focus on dates (holiday breaks) may have reduced added stressors during the process. Even with the hurdles encountered during the project, I am still pleased with the chosen project and result. The future holds opportunities to share these resources with other GAPP programs to encourage others to step out of their comfort zones and embrace the unknown through diversity and inclusion.
References


Great Learning. (2023, June 26). Customs and Traditions in Germany that International Students Should be Familiar With. Great Learning Blog  

Appendix

https://sites.google.com/u.boisestate.edu/borahboise-gapp/home

Website Screenshots:
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**German Culture Facts, Customs, Traditions, and Things To Know**

The German culture is renowned for its unique language, food, traditions, and history. It has a long and storied history from being part of the Holy Roman Empire to being one of the most economically stable countries in the world.

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**GAPP is a whole family experience. Are you ready to:**

- Adopt a German into your family for 2.5 weeks and expose them to normal life in the United States?
- Trust a German family to adopt your student into theirs for 2.5 weeks and expose them to normal life in Germany?
- Make a lifelong connection to a family in Germany?
- Experience a different culture, language and way of life?
- Give your student a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that they can write about in college applications and talk about in job interviews?
If for some reason you would like your application to be removed from the selection process, please let Frau Steiner or Frau Gorton know as soon as possible.

- I'm going to be alone in a different country.
  You are NOT alone. You will be picked up by the end of the trip (not really...)  
- It's expensive.
  You have a year to pay off the trip. We can find a payment plan that works for you! Also, there is no way you could recoup this input at this price point.  
- I don't know (enough) German.
  Your host partner will speak English and your host parents will speak pretty good English too!  
- My parents are divorced. How does that work with a host partner?  
  They are here to ease your way.  

**Have more questions?**  
Reach out to Frau Steiner or Frau Gorton!