

Success Story :: Pre-Freshman Semester Abroad Program in Boston

Project Objectives

A leading Boston university started a degree program that begins with a semester abroad. Each cohort of students begin study in either the UK, Greece, or Australia during their first semester prior to Spring enrollment on the main campus. Because the students began their matriculation in different locations, the school wanted a way to help the students come together as a cohort. The school needed a solution that would fulfill the following requirements:

- Provide an online environment for students to share their current learning experiences
- Allow students to view and interact with the experiences of their peers across all program locations
- Provide parents with a window into their children's learning experiences during their semester abroad
- Provide some indication of the program affiliation (UK, Greece, or Australia) to put the communication in context

Existing Pain Points

GreenFerret focused on the following area of concern:

- School officials in Boston had very little communication with students abroad. Often these communications were inconsistent across students and cohorts.
- The students had no tools or forums with which to share their experiences with each other and thus had no means or opportunity to experience the bonding that occurs with co-located student populations.
- Parents knew little about the activities of their students during their time abroad.
- Students did not want to communicate status and activities in multiple forums and would appreciate a single communication mechanism to serve all audiences.

An analysis revealed that both parents and school officials wanted to learn about the student's experience. Parents wanted frequent checks with the students regarding their academic progress. The school, on the other hand, wanted to gauge the effectiveness and understand benefits of the program for the students.

Students, meanwhile, had multiple demands on their time. In addition to taking a full semester load of courses, they were learning a lot about the host country and the cultural values practiced there. Students also enjoyed extra-curricular activities, meeting new people, and making new friends. All this activity meant the students had a lot of information to record and often had to record the same information twice: once for parents and once for the school.

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The GreenFerret expert interviewed five students on their writing experiences and their thoughts on providing information both to parents and to the school as well. All the students felt the reporting was a lot of work. Four of the five students also felt that the additional requirement of providing the same or similar information to the school as well was simply too much work.

Totally lacking in the existing situation was any sharing of experiences among the students themselves. Program officials felt such interactions were crucial to helping the students find success by understanding and learning from the experiences of other students, both at their own locations and at the other program locations. For example, a student having communication challenges in the UK might learn from the success stories of students in Greece or Australia, and vice versa.

Solution

GreenFerret delivered a “write once” strategy that appealed to students and a “deliver broadly” solution that enabled parents, school officials, and other students to all learn about an individual’s experience.

We proposed creating a single site that would host an individual blog for each student. The site was marketed as a tour diary to the students and served as a central location to post their thoughts and images. Parents could access the site and also get notified by email when new their student had posted a new entry. School officials could read across the blogs and identify positive learning trends as well as issues that may need addressing. A centralized feed on the main entry page that showed recent posts and a search capability across all the blogs allowed the students to learn from each other.

GreenFerret used WordPress as the foundation technology, then customized it to fit the needs of the program. WordPress is an open source blogging software application with a free usage license that also provides permission for customizations.

Part of the customization included providing an easy way for students to quickly identify the host country of the blogger in order to put the comments into context. First, every student had to indicate location when signing up for the blog. Using this profile information, the customization could then display a small country flag next to the blogger to indicate their host country. This visual indicator on the front page meant the reader did not need to open the individual profile in order to ascertain the host country for that blogger.

By providing individual pages for each student, parents could quickly and easily got directly to the student page by using a bookmark, for example. Parents could also peruse other blogs to see how friends or other students in the program were doing.

Techniques and Technologies Used

WordPress MU, PHP, MySQL, HTML, JavaScript



Figure 0: The hosting country flag preceded each blog entry (shown circled.)

