Interview Summary with Dr. Brooke Shurer: Director of International Programs at Meredith College

Emily Lane

Penn State

Dr. Brooke Shurer is, and has been, the director of international programs at Meredith College for the past seven years, during which she has helped build and promote a successful study abroad program. Meredith is a private, all women’s college, that has prioritized international education both to their local students hoping to study abroad and to international students studying in North Carolina. This interview discusses the scope of responsibilities for a director of international programs, the educational background required to be effective in the various levels of international education, a typical day as director of international programs, relevant experience preferred for incoming professionals, and a brief overview of working with students with disabilities.

As the director of international programs at Meredith College, Dr. Brooke Shurer is a professional that is responsible for many programs and people. She oversees both study-abroad opportunities and international students. The study-abroad programs include faculty lead programs, affiliate programs, semester long programs, year-long programs, and permanent programs. The international programs include both degree and non-degree seeking students, students with F1 visas, students with DACA status, refugee students, immigrant students, and undocumented students. Furthermore, the international education office that Dr. Shurer oversees is also responsible for any internationally related projects the college undertakes, international guest speakers, interdepartmental collaboration with various international programs, and overall globalization initiatives on the campus. Finally, Dr. Shurer supervises four fulltime staff members, occasional graduate interns, and a, “small army of student assistants”. Alongside these staff, some aspects of her job that are unique to the director positions is being the, “risk management and crisis management point person. Meaning that I am responsible for risk assessment for potential new programs. I also manage crisis issues when they happen abroad through working interdepartmentally with legal services, health services, student services, or any other services needed to deal with any emergency that happens abroad. I am on call 24/7/365 whenever there are Meredith students studying abroad.”

Meredith also has a permanent satellite campus in Sanselpolcro, Italy. Here, many classes are offered that follow the Meredith academic guidelines and fulfil credits towards graduation. Often faculty from Meredith take time off from teaching in America to teach at the Italy campus. This campus also offers noncredit classes for retired faculty such as cooking, art, or culture classes that provide income for the campus. As the satellite campus is a nonprofit university campus, these noncredit classes allow them “break even” in their funding while still providing some scholarship opportunities for students hoping to study there.

As an undergraduate student, Dr. Shurer attended UNC Chapel Hill and was an English major. Following this, she completed a year-long study abroad internship at Emory University before pursuing her Masters of Higher Education Administration at North Carolina State University. Throughout this Masters program, Dr. Shurer focused as many projects, assignments, or interviews on international education as she could. She states, “This level of focus was really helpful for me, and luckily the faculty and program were supportive of me doing a deep dive into international education through the various lenses of my classes.” She then completed a Ph.D. at North Carolina State and explained that although the skills she learned as a doctoral student are not necessary to do her job, it provides the professional currency needed to establish and maintain fruitful relationships with other faculty members of the college. It is also helpful currency to be viewed as a peer when she needs to have difficult conversations with faculty.

One great thing about being the director of international programs is that there is not a typical day. Alongside staying current in worldwide news, she is responsible for meeting with various faculty, committees, and scholarship programs. It is truly impressive how much Dr. Shurer supervises. If there is an emergency with a student abroad whether regarding issues relating to legal, logistical, visa, health, or interpersonal conflicts, Dr. Shurer will drop any pre-existing obligations to make coordinating the solution to these problems her first priority. Although serious emergencies like this are rare, they do prevent her job from ever becoming mundane. For example, there are currently students in programs that are very close to riots in Asia or in Africa, and if the issues become exacerbated, she will be the point-person in connecting the proper offices in collaboration to ensure the students’ safety.

According to Dr. Shurer, Meredith College is focused on providing equal opportunities to any student who attends, including students with disabilities. The American Disability Act, ADA, is strictly enforced in America to support the equality for students with disabilities. However, other countries are not required to comply with the ADA, so studying abroad can become tricky when it comes to providing accommodations and equal opportunities. Legally no office can ask about disabilities during the application process, but sometimes post acceptance, the students will self-disclose that they have a documented disability. At this point a discussion is opened with the student, student services, student disabilities office, student health office, and any other office that is deemed helpful in providing an accommodations plan that is helpful for the student’s success abroad. For example, Dr. Shurer discussed a student who wanted to study abroad but was visually impaired and utilized the assistance of a seeing eye dog. The question of how effectively the seeing eye dog could help her in a country neither her nor the dog had visited was raised. After collaboration with various offices and the student, it was decided that the student needed a human assistant during this experience. The study abroad office then worked with the student to arrange and fund this accommodation so the student could still study abroad. Situations like this are not uncommon, but most issues are able to be accommodated through communication and planning. Dr. Shurer provided many examples of study abroad experiences that students with disabilities pursued, and there has not been a student that has been restricted from studying abroad following proper communication and collaboration. However, In the event that there is an issue that cannot be accommodated by the program or country that the student initially applied for, other options will be explored.

All in all, interviewing Dr. Shurer was incredibly informative and inspiring. Following the interview, she provided further resources for information regarding international education and study abroad careers.