

INTRODUCTION

Portia Prebys*

EDUCATING IN PARADISE: THIRTY YEARS OF REALITIES AND EXPERIENCES OF NORTH AMERICAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES IN ITALY

The Association of American College and University Programs in Italy was founded in Rome, in February of 1978, by Richard Arndt, the Cultural Attaché at the United States Embassy in Rome, and by John D'Arms, then Director of the American Academy of Rome, to give form and substance to voluntary association by representatives of a small group of university-level study programs in Rome and Florence, that, in turn, had been founded by American colleges and universities to host exclusively their own American students. After having carefully studied their historical and administrative situations, the administrators of these programs were obliged to recognize that, while operating on Italian soil, they were functioning under highly unusual conditions, a fact that had implications and consequences for both nations in question. This demanding group at the head of the Association of American College and University Programs in Italy (AACUPI) considered it necessary to give some objective stability to their activities, in order to, later on, be able to answer to both the American and Italian authorities, regarding their academic presence, and comply with the multiple realities then existing.

At that time, it was generally recognized that the idea of a university's having a study program abroad, distinct from the simple matter of sending individual students abroad, was a relatively new one worldwide. Before the Americans elaborated on this model, the only

* Portia Prebys, President of the Association of American College and University Programs in Italy, is Director of the Rome Program, Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana, USA.

historical precedents for university programs abroad were represented by colonial or imperial models, such as the University of Ceylon, which the British founded as part of their colonial responsibilities. For other reasons, Napoleon Bonaparte founded in Rome, at the Villa Medici, a sort of academy where young French students could study fine arts. The various national academies soon followed suit, in order to study, in Rome, the best that Italy had to offer, to encourage inspiration and creation in young artists and scholars. But the American university programs in question were extremely different in that they were independent, whether state or private: The United States has never had, for Constitutional motives, a ministry on the federal government level that was closely involved in education.

From the very beginning, it was clear that AACUPI and its member institutions were not seeking to impose the American educational model on other nations. For more than two hundred and fifty years, writers, painters, sculptors, and American men of letters had visited Italy—a paradise of riches offered to whomever was capable of comprehending them—taking back home with them, afterward, their experiences which were utilized, directly and indirectly, to create their own national culture. The same can be said of American students who have been coming to Italy, for over eighty years, to study in programs designed to help them better understand what Italy has to offer them.

The development that Americans gave to study abroad programs was dictated, in fact, right from the beginning, by a typically American interest in and a fascination for everything new in this paradise, due to the need for a richer educational experience, and to the desire to open up to other cultures so as to reduce one's own provincialism. For the scholar, on all levels in Italy can be found a concentration of history, a disposition for new experiences in the field of culture, and new sources of knowledge and pleasure that do not exist in America. Personally and culturally, much is gained by an Italian experience, and what remains from an experience of this sort, a cultural self-definition that grows with time, is distinct, unique and singular, for each individual. Finding yourself in paradise, to then find yourself as a person because of this paradise, means reaching the top.

In fact, the American model of academic presence abroad is an historical anomaly which seems to have been followed only by Canada. The fact that American institutions of higher learning abroad represent an exception, rather than the rule, has conditioned, right from the beginning, the formation of AACUPI. Notwithstanding this, Americans still

maintain that the extension of studies abroad is a positive phenomenon and they wish it to continue. North Americans would undoubtedly be happy to see other nations institute study abroad programs, and, in theory, the majority of them would do their best to receive in the United States, similar programs, if it should be asked of them. It could not help but result in better understanding, and cooperation, between nations, on all levels. Unfortunately, this phenomenon has not occurred.

Certainly, in North America, universities receive more foreign students than any other nation. But, North American academic and fiscal structures would not tolerate a foreign university program that would come and set up shop, with its own faculty, and its own separate residence, participating at will and whim in American life. North Americans would be shocked by an operation of this type, and they would question who these people were and what they were doing on American soil. American immigration authorities, and tax officials, would study the situation very closely. As far as AACUPI is concerned, we realized right from the start that this type of foreign presence raised particularly acute problems in a highly centralized nation such as Italy.

Besides, this meeting of two cultures took place where no regulations nor laws existed that could have made this meeting easier. To face these problems, and for other reasons, as well, AACUPI came into existence and is proud today of its one hundred and thirty-five members; it is recognized as the common representative of American and Canadian institutions that operate study programs in Italy for their own students, over twenty thousand, who study in Italy every year.

Among the one hundred and thirty-five members of AACUPI, there are no two programs alike, from an ideological, didactic, organizational and administrative point of view: the variety of programs is both surprising and attractive. About one third of the member institutions seek to offer a broad educational and cultural base for a degree in architecture, usually, third or fourth year courses, with some member institutions hosting young architects studying to earn an M.A. These so-called architecture programs, offer courses in the history of architecture and art, urban studies, theory, design, and special projects that put the student into direct contact with the different cultural and historical context. An integral part of course work, numerous visits are organized within Rome and Florence, and to other cities and areas within Italy of noteworthy artistic, cultural and historical interest-experiences that are essential for a young architect, in today's world, who will have to face working in the future in a global environment.

Many programs offer courses in general culture to their students, Liberal Arts, in short, along with courses in Italian language and literature. History of art, as well as the figurative arts, attract many American students, as do, too, archaeology and the Classics. Interdisciplinary study is the rule. Of late, there is a tendency to teach business courses along with the social, political, historical and human sciences. Mostly, these courses are taught in English on the Italian campus of the program in Italy. Moreover, many centers offer at least one or two courses in the Italian language to encourage the students to acquire a better command of the language. For years, many programs have had special and formal exchange relationships with Italian universities, especially in Bologna, Florence and Padua, by which, American students capable of doing so linguistically, attend courses exclusively in Italian on the Italian university campus while remaining enrolled in their home campus degree program. All programs offer their students field trips within Italy which illustrate on-site the subject matter taught previously in the classroom.

A serious study of academic tourism requested by, and based on AACUPI member institutions was carried out in 1992, and then, again, in 2000, by IRPET, the *Istituto Regionale per la Programmazione Economica della Toscana*, a Tuscan research institute, which provided extremely interesting data on these American programs. In particular, the last official study reported that 60% of these American students study art and history of art during their stay in Italy; that 51% study Italian language and culture; that 36% study economics and social sciences; that 32% study architecture; and that 18% study Classics. The investigation confirmed that in 2000 these university programs represented 6% of the entire national flow of tourists to places of historical interest, and represented for the Italian economy a direct expenditure of 436 billion Italian liras, without taking into consideration the indirect effects caused by their presence. This sum of money, generated almost exclusively in the United States, is transferred to Italy annually by college and university programs located here. Up-dated statistics for 2008 are provided at the end of this volume.

The reasons why a student comes to Italy to study are many, but almost always, it is for cultural stimulation. Italy presents a positive image of itself, a paradise, which decidedly influences a student's choice to study abroad, and, particularly, in Italy. Many come, too, to seek their roots, as Italo-Americans, and, in this case, the paradise is of another nature. Today, in a top level curriculum, a period of study abroad of this

type is highly innovative, and quite desirable. These reasons become more real as times goes on: according to the IRPET study done in 2000: 87% of all students who have studied in Italy return, at least once in their lives, to revisit their fascinating paradise, that becomes, in the end, their personal realm.

The qualities of vitality, thoroughness and intensity that characterize these study programs are unique. The task awaiting the American student is an extremely serious one, and very challenging. Each program has well-defined and precise objectives; the academic level is excellent, the professors-Italians, Europeans, North Americans-are specialists in their field within the wide range of courses offered, and are dedicated to this specialized kind of teaching. Getting to this paradise is easy, staying on demands uncommon perseverance.

Young students have a deep fascination for Italy, that stimulates the imagination, very intense interests, both for the richness of the civilization and ancient arts that they can readily reach out and touch, and for the customs and cultural diversity that literature, cinema, music and television have continually thrust at them. Studying in paradise, perhaps, is what the student expects. Measuring up to the existing reality, a reality very distant from the American one, requires personal determination, however. Measuring the distance that exists between the United States-a cultural and geographic distance-and the nearness of Italy, ancient and modern, has always played a significant role in the development of the ideals and the icons that have slowly but surely identified America and being American. Sometimes, this role is easily identifiable, but, more often, difficult to live.

This image of Italy is successively, and inevitably mediated by the experience of direct knowledge: the fusion between desire and experience, between dream and reality, creates composite images, a subjective vision that often harmonizes with, but sometimes does not, the objective one. Each student is, day after day, put to the test by the comparison, sometimes disappointing, between the myth created in his imagination, and the reality of life in the host country. Paradise becomes real, and rendering this reality manageable and acceptable is one of the most delicate tasks facing the faculty in teaching these students. Every day, the student involved in the program, is guided through the human and social disciplines, to discover the profoundly diverse realities that this new country proposes to him socially, culturally, and on a human level. This critical process is constant for the student; it pervades every

single aspect of his or her daily life, every single choice made, from the simplest to the most complex.

These study abroad programs demand a great deal of work of their students, because they exact a multiple-faceted learning ability: an orientation to the various historical periods, and even more, an entry into them, culturally, in a country foreign to them. Their serious route to their new existence brings with it a new personal identity. This identity comes into being through meeting Italian culture, and is the personal response to this life experience, along with the personal capacity of fusing this experience with their culture of origin. This itinerary is covered only when accompanied by the love, by the patience, by the perseverance of he who wants to understand, and to live fully this new life, in the new host country, with reciprocal respect. For each and every student who has successfully traveled this road, his or her personal identity will be forever tied to Italy: a month, a semester, a year spent in Italy means, for these young people, the quality of their future life.

There are AACUPI programs in Alba, Arezzo, Ariccia, Ascoli Piceno, Asolo, Bàcoli, Bologna, Castel Gandolfo, Como, Cortona, Ferrara, Fiesole, Florence, Frattocchie, Genoa, Macerata, Marino, Milan, Orvieto, Padua, Parma, Perugia, Prato, Rome, Sansepolcro, Scandicci, Sesto Fiorentino, Siena, Sorrento, Turin, Venice, Vicchio, Vicenza and Viterbo. The oldest program is in Florence, Smith College, which was founded in 1931. Every year, new programs open in the more traditional centers, like Rome and Florence, but also in new cities, such as Viterbo and Perugia. The twenty thousand students who study in Italy every year spend, on the average, more than five months in the town of their choice, some enrolled in programs that last an academic quarter, others that last three, four and even eight, or nine months. Even those students who attend more advanced courses, both Master's program students and PhD students, prefer to spend relatively long periods of time in their paradise, an average stay of more than five months, as well. Therefore, these opportunities for study in Italy are of particular importance because they represent long-term tourism, which produces important effects, and interaction with the economic and social reality of the areas in which these study programs are located.

The vast majority of programs does not recruit students on Italian soil, but brings its own students here, students who are already enrolled in a degree program on the home campus in the United States or Canada. Most of these students are American or Canadian citizens, but some come from other countries, having chosen, previously, to enroll in a

North American college or university degree program. Some programs accept students from colleges or universities that do not operate a program in Italy, but who wish to offer this opportunity to their enrollees. In this last case, these particular students enroll for the period of their stay in Italy in an institution that can offer them this experience. Therefore, all tuition is paid directly to the college or university in the United States or Canada, on North American soil. Many of these students receive loans from private or government entities, scholarships granted by the institutions themselves, and by other private and public entities. The IRPET study done in 2000 showed that more than 30% of the students studied in programs that cost more than \$15,000; 16% studied in programs that cost from \$10,000 to \$15,000; and 33% studied in programs that cost from \$8,000 to \$10,000.

Less than a quarter of the programs own their own center in Italy, according to the last IRPET study. But, some own residences of great prestige and historical value, such as Harvard University's Villa I Tatti, located in the hills around Fiesole, Georgetown University's Villa Le Balze in Fiesole, and New York University's Villa La Pietra on the Via Bolognese, in Florence, a very important bequest by Sir Harold Acton. These properties, located in historical centers, or in very particular residential areas, earthly paradises, require considerable upkeep and serious civic responsibilities.

In any case, the operating costs of a program are substantial: important fields of expenditure for all programs are salaries and stipends, external assistance, utilities and suppliers. Personnel, both academic and non academic, is numerous, and can be divided by nationality, about 50% Italian, and 50% American. More than a quarter of the latter group, the Americans, live permanently in Italy, and have, along with their families, become a tangible cultural bridge between our two worlds.

Still, the first and foremost objective of AACUPI has been to act as a clearing house for information and for ideas about problems connected to cultural exchange programs, within Italy, and amongst different countries, a distinctly different trade-off than simply exchanging students. In the beginning, a study or research group was envisioned that would collect information by mail, through word of mouth, or using more formal tools of communication, such as conferences and seminars. Because of AACUPI's informative and research role, new programs can, today, obtain comparative information in almost every field of interest. Moreover, the total informative contribution furnished by associations of

this type can elevate research to a truly international level, reaching some kind of consensus for programs of this type operating abroad.

No less important as a role has been AACUPI's charge to, first, identify potential fundamental legal and fiscal problems, intrinsic to the presence on foreign soil of non government institutions, and, then, resolve them in the most equitable manner possible. The transfer of the non-profit status of colleges and universities from Canada and the United States to Italy was necessary to focus on the true mission of these institutions operating in Italy, comprehend their goals and safeguard their integrity. In the past twenty years, the passage through the Italian Parliament of two specific laws, whose intention it has been to clarify the legal and fiscal position of AACUPI programs, and to protect, and regularize the specific nature of these programs, has made reciprocal understanding possible, with subsequent recognition by the Italian Ministry of the University and Scientific and Technological Research.

Another important secondary objective of AACUPI is to provide a defense mechanism, to answer the question: What is the best way to clarify and coordinate our needs so that our United States and Canadian Embassies and Consulates in Italy, and the Italian authorities, can, effectively, assist us in administrative matters and in matters pertinent to our non-profit status as educational institutions? The idea was that AACUPI, acting for everyone, could obtain better results than any single member acting alone. The introduction of and continued regular communication between member institutions, and the effective collaboration by everyone, have made the representation on the part of AACUPI of collective interests possible with official American, Canadian and Italian organs, and other official entities, such as cultural, philanthropic and educational institutions, not part of AACUPI. Working together, for everyone, succeeds.

Paradise does, indeed, exist in Italy, for us, for our students. This beautiful country continually confirms its inexhaustible capacity to enrich, to inspire, and to offer itself to whomever comes to draw from it, and, who then, creates for himself and for others. The future promises further exchange, in both directions, between Italy and the United States and Canada, an exchange that will necessarily elicit a better world, for everyone.

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