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JAGS Sr. Capstone

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### Hosting an Exchange Student

Ever since elementary school I have always been interested in other cultures. My first few schools I have attended have been extremely diverse which exposed me to so many kinds of people to talk to and observe. I was raised to accept everyone no matter their skin color, religion, and beliefs which led me to my curiosity of different cultures. My sophomore year of 2016-2017 I decided to host a foreign exchange student.

She is from Thailand and her name is Tunyapath Ujgin but her American nickname was Patty. She was 17 and is from a province called Nonthaburi in southeastern Thailand. She speaks Thai and if you're not familiar with it it's is extremely different than English. This caused quite the language barrier and made it difficult to communicate at first since she's not very experienced with using the English language. This was her first time in America therefore she had quite the culture shock when arriving.

The reason I sparked an interest in hosting was because my dad taught an American Culture class to a group of students from China at our local community college. I met all of his students and instantly felt a connection with them. One of the reasons was they are so polite and respectful. They would always bring us gifts and never failed to be good, intent listeners. Because we bonded so much, one of them actually returned to America to live here after her program was over. She's been living here for three years now and attended a college about 45

minutes away. She is like family to me and mine, and I am so happy she was put into my life. Ever since we met her I knew I wanted to expand on the Asian culture and get to know more people from it.

The whole exchange process can be a bit overwhelming from the outside but once you get all of the information it's very easy to manage. If you are not doing this through a school the first step is to pick which company you want to work with (Looking). There are millions of different organizations out there to choose from. Their main job is to be a support system for the student and help them solve any obstacles they face. For example if the student feels uncomfortable with their host family but don't want to tell them directly, they should be able to go to the organization without hesitating. Essentially the organization's purpose is to match the students with host families, keep the student safe, handle the money aspect, and make sure the student is comfortable and getting their education (Student Exchange). In order to narrow it down here's a few tips I learned.

You want to make sure the organization is Department of State (D.O.S.) Compliant. Basically this means that they meet all of the state's standards to be an exchange student organization. In most places, including Ohio, a few of the standards it needs to follow are legitimate academic schools, has a supportive staff, makes education requirements for the student, and provides the correct health insurance if they get ill so it's not just out of pocket. During this opportunity it's crucial to keep everyone safe and to keep a positive mindset throughout the whole process.

Being CSIET Listed is another contributing factor to the process (Host). CSIET is the abbreviation for 'Council on Standards for International Travel,' and was created and is now led

by Director Christopher B. Page. Their mission statement is, “CSIET’s purpose is to cultivate excellence, to facilitate a spirit of cooperation and support, and to help ensure safety and value for international exchange students, secondary schools and natural parents.” It’s similar to DOS but its main focus is high school exchange students and making sure they get a beneficial cultural and educational experience on their journey. They also hold conferences for all the exchange organizations to come together and compare what works and doesn’t work for them. This is useful because they take past methods and put them in place based off them being beneficial to the students and families or not.

Something else to think about is the liability protection and insurance. You may think it’s only a year and setting up an entire separate insurance just for this would be pointless, but it’s crucial when sending someone overseas into an unfamiliar environment, especially if it’s their first time. There’s always a chance for someone to get sick whether expected or not, you must be prepared for this (Host). You need to make sure the organization you choose lists lots of details about their insurance policy that they offer. Many companies try to overlook this aspect and distract the viewers with other, more interesting components to make you forget about this detail to save them money as well as time. “Exchange programs don’t usually have their own insurance, but instead work with other insurance organizations to ensure that you are able to pay for any medical costs while studying abroad (Looking).”

There’s tons of insurance plans to choose from, but the most popular is the Student Health Insurance. It covers mental health, pre-existing special conditions and maternity as well as basic physical health needs. The Student Health Insurance requires monthly payments and has four different plan levels called Smart, Budget, Select, and Elite. You choose which level based

on how much you want to spend and that state of the person's health. They are listed from the most basic to the most complex level quality of insurance (International).

Believe it or not, not all of these organizations' goals are for the exchange students to get the best cultural and academic experience possible. Many just want their money and don't care about their journey and any hardships they face.

For example, one family has a bad experience with their exchange student and the organization. Aside from the student being disrespectful, the organization wasn't handling the situation well. The host family told the organization that it wasn't going well and they wanted their student to be sent back home. "The agency handled the situation so poorly by telling the student to find a friend's couch to sleep on. We were yelled at by the agency and the student was picked up and taken to the local coordinator's house until he was placed elsewhere. They placed him within a few miles of our house where he continued to visit and stalk our home as well as other places that he knew he could find us. They had no exit strategy and left all of his documentation/passport in our home. Considering he had no friends, this was impossible."

This is why I don't recommend going through a profit-based organization and try to find any local non-profits. A popular, well-known non-profit would be International Student Exchange. Found in 1982, they are certified and have provided a quality exchange journey for over 30,000 students (About). They are run less like businesses and more like partners. They also will have no reason to be biased towards whichever level class the student comes from, simply because they don't even make any money off of it. They will be much more likely to provide the same level of assistance to a lower income family and a higher income family.

Once you have chosen which company you want to work with (we chose World Heritage), it's time for the fun part; matching the host family with the exchange student. This process begins by having the student apply to the program and get accepted, much like getting into college, and the host family has to apply as well. For the host family's application we had to submit an online application, receive a home visit, interview, and background check to make sure we can provide a safe and functional environment for the guest moving in.

The online application is very short and to the point. You put all your basic personal information and then answer a few questions such as if you have any pets, any other languages anyone in the family can speak, describing your family and their routine, which gender student you prefer (Host Family). As for the home visit and interview it was very casual and all they asked was that you be yourself and show them your everyday life. Some staff members of the organization came over and explained to us how the whole process worked, and answered any questions we had (Share!).

The choosing process, at least for us, consisted of us reading as many letters with pictures attached as we want with all of the applicant's contact information and facts about themselves. Many consisted of broken English and words that don't make sense which really just made their essays ten times more authentic and one-of-a-kind. My family and I looked for any students with similar interests and lifestyles as us. We wanted to make sure they would fit in with our routines without question. We also paid attention to how the essay was written and tried to pick up on any emotions they had while writing it to take it in on a deeper, more personal level.

We read the letters over the course of about two weeks, but when we saw Patty's we knew it was instantly a match. She had talked a lot about her personality rather than what she

likes to do, unlike most of the other we had looked over (Just Exactly How). She wrote about how she just would do anything to keep her host family happy and that she is very respectable and independent. These qualities were very important to us when choosing who we wanted because everyone in our family has them as well. We knew she would be the best fit for us.

Once you have found a match with your chosen student there are some more steps to take before they can start their trip. Frequently, at least with World Heritage, the student is put through a course, almost like a class, in their country (Just Exactly How). In this program they learn about social norms in wherever they're traveling to and as much of the language they're going to be using as possible. Some social norms such as what not to do in the country, how to show appreciation, and even silly things like how they eat their food. Luckily for us, Patty has been taking English as a Second Language (ESL) since the first grade so she was already pretty familiar with English. When she arrived she was very shy and when she did speak a lot of the time she would make little mistakes. But by the time she left to go back to Thailand she was completely fluent in English because being in this country forced her to speak English all the time.

She arrived in America about two weeks before the school year started and she was automatically put into a similar program here with other exchange students at our school. It was both a support group and educational class because she was with people who traveled overseas just like her. She became friends with everyone in this class because they could all bond over being from different cultures and talk about their experience in America. There was about ten kids in the class. I actually got to meet them all too. Our organization would host events with this group of kids such as laser tag, dinners, mini golf, and many more activities to encourage the

host family and student to spend time together outside of the house. These events are paid for by the organization as well.

A lot of people wonder about what happens if it doesn't work out and the student ends up not being a fit for the family. You must understand that not everything is going to run smoothly, because if it does then there's likely to be something wrong. In rare cases like these, you or the student must voice this to the organization for them to handle it the correct way. If the organization is not aware of this then things could get worse and both the family and student are wasting time. These students pay lots of money to be traveling overseas, and for them not to enjoy the experience is unfair (World Heritage). You have to understand that it's not always going to be a perfect match, but that the situation can be handled as long as there is communication. Like JAGS has always taught me, you shouldn't be afraid to speak up and be straight-forward if there's a problem. The organization has the ability to place the student into a different home and give the host family a different student if it's just not clicking. This isn't a big deal either and happens all the time during exchange programs.

As you can already tell, when hosting an exchange student there are many factors to consider beforehand. It's not the type of decision that is spontaneous and unplanned. You have to be prepared. You never actually know what to expect until the student has arrived in your home and you've given them some time to adjust. However, there are a few accommodations you should expect to provide for the student, just as a sign of courtesy and respect.

Make sure there's an extra space in your home for the student to have their own privacy, this is extremely important. Imagine living somewhere for an entire school year and not having your own personal space (Host). In the Thai culture especially, they are big on privacy and

keeping to themselves. We had an extra bedroom set up for her with a bed, desk, chair, and closet. Since we wanted to make her feel at home we purchased a Thai tapestry to put on her wall so it would be the focal point of her room. We felt it would remind her of Thailand and make her feel less like a stranger in her new home.

We also found a few local oriental grocery stores that had authentic Thai food for her in case she missed it. And she did. Here's a few of the stores we frequently visited for her. Young Oriental Food & Gift Market, 6644 Wise Ave NW, North Canton, OH 44720. Oriental Food & Gift, 2842 Whipple Ave NW, Canton, OH 44708. Tink Holl, 1735 E. 36th St, Cleveland, OH 44114 (Asian Grocery). The food ended up being a huge factor with her living in America and she never fully got used to it. She claimed the food here was very sweet and unhealthy so she did a lot of her own cooking at the house. Sometimes she would even cook us a traditional Thai meal so we could have a taste of what she's used to. Her food was very different than ours and was very spicy and was served in smaller portions. Although it was a good form of bonding because we could see a comparison between our countries and talk about what we liked, didn't liked, etc.

I also did a bit of research leading up to her arriving in our home (5 Tips). Before I studied into her culture all I knew was that she spoke Thai, but didn't actually know anything about the language. I learned that her language is extremely different from English, it doesn't even compare. Thai looks like a lot of lines and circles and is spoken very fast, at least to me. She did mention we spoke fast in return so it could just be the language barrier. I learned how to say very basic things like how to greet someone, how to say 'goodbye', 'yes' and 'no', 'welcome', and 'please' and 'thank you'. After learning these I knew I would have at least some



sort of communication through her culture and it would ensure us to get off on the right foot, since I really didn't know what to expect.

You have to have an open mind prior to hosting and be ready to make them a part of your life. Another measure I took to make her feel more welcome was I included her in many of my activities, especially my social life. For example, my friends and I go out to sushi every Thursday, it's our tradition. I invited her every week with us to make her feel more part of my life and get to know my friends more. It shouldn't feel like a chore or something unnatural, although it may at the beginning which is normal. Anytime I would make plans or leave the house I would often take Patty into consideration.

At first when she went to my school she was very shy and didn't have many friends. She opened up to me and explained that she was too afraid to speak to people in school because she was too nervous that she'd say something wrong and embarrass herself. No matter how many times I told her people at our school would've understood, she still just couldn't get herself to branch out. I began introducing her to my friends who all are very understanding and familiar with other cultures as well as me (5 Tips). These characteristics of them made it easier for Patty to hold a conversation. I tried to take her with me as much as I could because for one, she had no way of driving, and second of all I didn't want her to feel stuck at any point. I wanted her to have as much freedom as she could while she was visiting here.

I chose this for my Capstone because I'm very passionate about cultural diversity and thankful for the personal experience I had. Hosting has made me realize I am living in my own little bubble when there's so much out in the world to explore. Sharing this story with other will hopefully make them want to be a host in the future. This opportunity was a learning, exciting

and one-of-a-kind experience that I'd like to do again when I raise a family of my own. This is a perfect representation of my JAGS career because it showed me how important diversity is in my present life and future. I am more culturally accepting now after being exposed to this completely new culture.

In my Capstone I hope to accomplish informing others on how to host a foreign exchange student of their own, as well as the ups and downs that go along with it. I want other students to not be afraid to take on this opportunity because it isn't like any other. Hosting gave me a new friend, a new outlook on other cultures, and a new experience to share with others.

The JAGS pillar my Capstone reflects most is Recognizing Perspectives. My family and I had to adjust our home to be fitting to Patty and make her feel as welcome and comfortable as possible during her stay. We did research on the Thai culture prior to her arrival in order to be prepared and educated to make her feel more at home. She took a year off of school to spend it with us in a completely new country, so I wanted to return the dedication and respect she brought with her.

In the future I believe JAGS will continue to reflect in my day-to-day life and always be a part of me. I plan to do lots of traveling overseas, especially to the Asian region. I want to experience being in an unfamiliar environment, not knowing what to expect. I've learned how to be respectful and open-minded of people who live completely different lifestyles and will portray my new mindset in every new environment I am put in. I've learned I have patience with others, and how to be a teacher to those whose questions are unanswered. This program has taught me how to do extensive research on topics I've never studied before, construct graphs of trends, and prepare speeches on new topics to me.

To future JAGgers, I hope my Capstone has made some type of impact on you. I hope you now know the steps to becoming a host family and all the emotions that go along with it. As foreign as this opportunity may seem, it will help guide you to your purpose in life. Hosting was a building block to help me find my passion and place in the world. It helped me be a leader in JAGS showing my classmates how beneficial hosting was to me. I explained to others how special and unforgettable this experience made out to be.

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