CONCLUSION: HOW TO PICK A FIELD SCHOOL THAT'S RIGHT FOR YOU

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Choosing to participate in an ethnographic or cultural anthropology field school is an important decision. There are a number of questions to consider when making a choice. These include: Know what is expected of you—what are the outcomes? What is the methodological "thrust" of the program—will you be in sync? What is the length of time of commitment—can you meet it? What is the relationship between the host community and the field school? Are you okay with it? Is there a language requirement and if so, can you meet it? How much structure is provided and what are your needs? Do you like to work independently or in a group? Would you feel most comfortable alone or in a group setting? How much day-to-day structure or supervision will you need and will you be likely to receive? Does the field school operate in a setting in which you want to be? Country? Locale? Climate? Are there any safety concerns you should consider? Will your university or college accept transfer credits if these are offered? Do you care? How much mentorship is provided? How much do you want? Is there an orientation and what does it cover? Are there prerequisites and are you adequately prepared? This chapter discusses what to think about as you try to answer these questions. To make the best choice possible, you need to think about what you wish to gain from the experience, your preferences, strengths and weaknesses. To get the most out of a field school experience, you should look for a program that challenges you to reach beyond your comfort zone, but not one that places such demands on you that you can never succeed. Because we do not often know the limits of our capacities, the key essential element for any student is the ability to be flexible, creative, and curious. If you can draw on these three characteristics, you are sure to be successful.

This bulletin has presented detailed accounts of several different field school programs, and provided information on a variety of others not described

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in-depth here. Although some programs restrict enrollment to students from the host institution, many are open to all. So, how do you pick a program that's right for you? While there are no guarantees, there are some general principles that can be applied to ensure a good fit. There are at least eleven questions you should be able to answer after reading through program literature and/or talking with the program director.[1] These are, in no particular order:

1. Know what is expected of you—what are the outcomes?
2. What is the methodological "thrust" of the program—will you be in sync?
3. What is the length of time of commitment—can you meet it?
4. What is the relationship between the host community and the field school? Are you okay with it?
5. Is there a language requirement and if so, can you meet it?
6. How much structure is provided and what are your needs? Do you like to work independently or in a group? Would you feel most comfortable alone or in a group setting? How much day-to-day structure or supervision will you need and will you be likely to receive?
7. Does the field school operate in a setting in which you want to be?
8. Country? Locale? Climate? Are there any safety concerns you should consider?
9. Will your university or college accept transfer credits if these are offered? Do you care?
10. How much mentorship is provided? How much do you want?
11. Is there an orientation and what does it cover?
12. Are there prerequisites and are you adequately prepared?

Some of these questions are easy to answer, such as the time frame of the program, while others are more obtuse. Even though you may not be fully informed as to how a program operates, you should be able to obtain at least some information related to each question. For those considering graduate school, or seeking graduate credit, make sure credits will transfer and that the reputation of the field school is sufficient to ensure this.

While field schools are often quite challenging academically, they are also challenging in the personal sphere as well. Almost every field school director I know has dealt with students who have difficulty adjusting to issues such as restrictions on diet and exposure to new, unfamiliar or even distasteful foods (such as fried mutton intestines). This can be especially problematic for vegetarians and vegans, who must either become a great deal more flexible in their diet or be sure they can regularly secure the kinds of food they need

to stay healthy. For example, in the Northwestern University Ethnographic Field School we have found that more and more students are vegetarians. We work very hard to accommodate their needs, especially during our orientation and other group meetings when we provide meals, but we caution them that many Navajo families will offer them mutton stew and fry bread (often fried in lard), and that they should be prepared to taste what is offered, or strategize a polite and socially acceptable way of refusing. Over the years, more Navajos are choosing to follow a vegetarian diet, so this is becoming less of a problem.

Similarly, students with disabilities or chronic medical conditions should also be sure to ask about accommodations before committing to a program. While all field schools should be expected to provide reasonable accommodations, the standard of reasonableness may differ in a foreign setting. Lack of accommodation is not condoned here, but it is a reality in some countries. For students who require regular medications, be sure to inquire about access and proper storage facilities, if these are required. For example, I always ask students to tell me on the application if they have a chronic medical condition or disability, and what medications they may be taking. There are two reasons for this: First, I want to be sure to place that student in a setting that will provide maximum accommodation, and, second, I want to be sure that the student's health is not compromised. For example, if I have a student enroll who uses a wheelchair, I want to make sure that the housing I secure for that individual is fully accessible. This cannot necessarily be done "after the fact." Or, if I have a student who uses medications that must be refrigerated, I will find him or her housing that has proper electricity and appliances. Unfortunately, many students are hesitant to reveal their use of certain types of medications, particularly drugs such as antidepressants. However, to ensure that students receive proper medical care, either ongoing or in an emergency, the responsible person, (in this case, the field school director) needs to know.

One of the most difficult issues students face is lack of privacy in a host family's home. Students frequently request to live with a local family, and some field schools build this experience into the program (e.g., see Wallace this volume). However, standards of personal privacy vary a great deal by culture, and it is not unusual for U.S. students to feel challenged by the general lack of privacy they encounter. Here again, flexibility is a must, but thinking through how important personal privacy is to you is an important prerequisite for ensuring a successful experience. In turn, if you chose a program in which you are likely to be working independently without regular contact with other students or faculty, think about how you will respond to some degree of social

isolation. I remember well my first fieldwork experience within the Navajo Nation. Although I was not formally enrolled in a field school, there were other students from my graduate program working in the same general area. After renting a one-room log cabin for the summer, I discovered that I was going to be living in a rather isolated locale, with no neighbors within view. Having been born and raised in Chicago, where I grew up in an apartment, I soon discovered that I was extremely sensitive to the silence of the place, especially at night. Every bird call, every crack of a twig caused me to jump. While I was quite adept at filtering out the sounds of my neighbors walking the floors above me, or the noise of the street outside my window, I was a total novice when it came to interpreting the sounds of nature. I soon realized that conducting fieldwork in a remote and isolated setting, such as the highlands of New Guinea (which I had actually considered very briefly), was not going to be a good choice for me!

One of the most unexpected responses that often arise for field school students in foreign settings is the high degree of discomfort they experience at being in the minority. Interestingly, this may be true regardless of the student's racial or ethnic background. Many students are surprised to learn that they are perceived as Americans first, and that their own ethnic heritage is of little account outside the United States. Even within the Navajo Nation students have discovered that few distinctions are drawn between White and African American non-Navajos. For students looking for an affiliation based on shared minority status in the larger system, this is often quite a threat to their sense of identity.

Altogether, the accumulation of demands placed on a student during the adjustment phase of a field school program may result in withdrawal, however temporary, nightly tears, feelings of panic, or even depression. The commonly used cover term for these emotional responses is *culture shock*. However, this term is used so frequently nowadays that it has lost much of its import and potency. But while almost every fieldworker experiences some degree of culture shock, even after repeated visits to the field, students and faculty alike should be sensitized to more dramatic or severe episodes that may actually endanger the health and well being of a student. Students should not hesitate to address their feelings with the faculty or staff, and they certainly should not feel embarrassed or demeaned by doing so. Therefore, it is important to ask ahead of time about what kinds of support are available to students who may have a difficult time adjusting to the field setting. If you know students who have previously been in the program you are investigating, ask them if this issue ever came up, either

for them or for another student, and if so, how was it handled. Do not be persuaded by program representatives who assure you that culture shock is never an issue for students in their field schools.

Choosing a field school is not easy, but it is also not that difficult a task if you know what you are looking for, and you take the time to think through your own preferences, strengths and weaknesses. To get the most out of a field school experience, you should look for a program that challenges you to reach beyond your comfort zone, but not one that places such demands on you that you can never succeed. Because we do not often know the limits of our capacities, the essential element for success in any field school program is the ability to be flexible, creative, and curious. If you can draw on these three characteristics, you are sure to be successful.

NOTES

1. A shorter list of questions appeared in N. Mahoney's "Choosing the Right Field School" (1999).

REFERENCES CITED

Mahoney, N.
1999 Choosing the Right Field School. Anthropology Newsletter, April 1999: 17.