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Loyola University—Chicago’s Public Diplomacy Breakthrough: The Vietnam Center ^[1]

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Education and exchange have long been staples of U.S. public diplomacy efforts—longer even than the term ‘public diplomacy’ has been in use. Loyola University--Chicago (Loyola) has taken education and exchange diplomacy where no other foreign university has gone before: Vietnam.

While Vietnam has a rapidly growing economy, a population of 88 million people, and an increasingly strong foothold in ASEAN, its education system has not yet developed at the rate of the rest of the country. In 2009, there were 2.1 million high school graduates in Vietnam, but only 250,000 available spots at institutions of higher learning. Due to funding shortages in the education system, which has led to cutbacks in faculty and staff, there is an actual capacity to serve only about 100,000 incoming college freshmen. Loyola may not have the means to provide the remaining 2 million students with a university education, but Loyola’s Vietnam Center has gotten off to a strong start and has groundbreaking ideas for expanding.

During the study tour in Vietnam supported by the USC Master of Public Diplomacy Program (MPD) and Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, five students from the MPD program had a chance to sit down with Loyola’s Vietnam Program Director, Julio Giulietti, who has run the program in Vietnam since it started a year and a half ago. Loyola has had great success with its study abroad programs in Rome and Beijing, and decided to open a third in Ho Chi Minh City because, as Giulietti animatedly states, “Nobody else has come here yet!”

Vietnam is notoriously selective about foreign entities operating within its borders, and understandingly so, in light of the centuries of successive foreign occupation. As Vietnam takes increasingly larger steps toward the international community, it opens its borders to a wide variety of foreign organizations. Australian, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Indian, Danish and German organizations are easily visible in its larger cities, and if you know where to look, you can find other Western European and North American groups seeking to engage the Vietnamese public as well.

Loyola is the first American university to be approved for an operating license from Vietnam’s Ministry of Education & Training, and the first to establish a full study abroad program in Vietnam. Juniors in their second semester at Loyola may participate in the one-year program, in which they take classes in English from Vietnamese professors at the University of Social Sciences & Humanities in Ho Chi Minh City. In their first semester in Vietnam, they have a Vietnamese roommate who assists them in processing their surroundings. For the second semester, Loyola students live with a host family. The students are also required to do ten

hours of community service and six weeks of international work experience. Loyola arranges a week of interviews with local organizations, and students can choose to come back to Vietnam as interns to complete this requirement after the year of study is finished.

While this study abroad program is a huge public diplomacy achievement in both education and exchange, Loyola has not stopped there. Its Vietnam Center runs a total of seven education and exchange programs, including Faculty and Staff Global Immersions in Vietnam, Nursing Faculty Education, University Management Training Seminars, Business Education, ESL Program and Stritch Medical School Rotation Program. These programs are not just groundbreaking because they are taking place in Vietnam; they have components that make them important models for any educational institution. For example, its 2.5 year Masters in Nursing Education program prepares nurses in both classroom and hospital settings in both Vietnam and the U.S., as ten weeks of the program take place in Chicago. Its University Management Training Seminars include 10-day training sessions on strategic planning, higher education finance, quality assurance, international planning, and human resource management, with the goal of assisting Vietnam to further the professional development of its large higher education sector.

Perhaps the most important public diplomacy work that Loyola is doing is working with both Vietnamese and English-speaking educational institutions to raise their education standards. As it is anywhere, education in Vietnam is big business. Nursing and other medical degrees are often purchased rather than earned, and universities are primarily unaccredited and operate far below international standards. ESL programs have reputations for being sub-par at best and outright fraud at worst, further straining the tenuous relationships between Vietnam and English-speaking countries that tout ESL outreach as the key to economic development. The Vietnam Center is trying to change norms in educational methods by offering programs that are stimulating and beneficial to the school, the students, and the greater society. For example, Loyola has partnered with a private university in Dalat to offer the country's first ever RN degree program.

Loyola's Vietnam Center is a great model for public diplomacy, and its success does not breed complacency. Evaluation and assessment tools are in place to monitor the programs and its findings are used to develop both better programming and stronger evaluation tools. What does better programming look like to Loyola? A full-scale Loyola nursing program at a local hospital or university, and an internationally accredited Liberal Arts School in Vietnam, though Giuletta admits these projects are far in the future. The most important task at hand for the Vietnam Center is investing time and cultural understanding into building a relationship among Loyola, its Vietnamese counterparts, and government officials, because it is the only way to secure operating licenses. Giuletta is confident that Loyola's model will continue to work as it is based on the philosophy that good, honest, trust-building work is both spiritually sustaining and developmentally sustainable.

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