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"Student Ambassadors": Developing an Older Student Cohort

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The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has an established history in international collaborations with objectives to develop new programs, schools, and universities worldwide. MIT is currently collaborating with the government of Singapore in the development of the new Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD). SUTD is a new engineering-oriented university that opened its doors to the first student cohort of approximately 320 students on May 7, 2012. To date, the MIT-SUTD Collaboration is the most holistic transplantation venture that MIT has undertaken.

Through this collaboration, the MIT team has attempted to bridge cultural differences and transfuse the MIT academic culture by three different avenues. MIT is proceeding with the SUTD development by focusing on (i) collaborative curriculum development, (ii) an immersive professional development program for new faculty, and (iii) support systems for students' co-curricular development. The team's effort towards transfusing the student culture through the avenue of co-curricular development is further discussed in this paper.

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In recent years, the impact of out-of-class experiences -especially co-curricular activities- has been studied at length in the higher education literature. As Kuh observes, "Most scholars who study the impact of college on students agree that what happens outside the classroom – the other curriculum – can contribute to valued outcomes of college" [1]. In addition, interaction with older student cohorts is considered to be a very influential factor in the establishment of student identity and student culture in any college or university environment. In its inaugural year, SUTD does not have a pre-existing student cohort or a pre-existing culture of campus life. The MIT team used of this lack of prior SUTD cohorts as a vehicle to enable diffusion of the MIT student culture and attitude to the newcoming SUTD students. To accomplish this task, the MIT team - in collaboration with the MIT International Science and Technology Initiatives (MISTI) program - initiated a new program called the MISTI Singapore Leadership Initiative (MISTI-SLI). Through the MISTI-SLI program, eighteen MIT students have traveled to Singapore in the summer of 2012 to act as the "older cohort" to freshman SUTD students. These MIT students are mentoring and aiding the SUTD freshmen in creating co-curricular activities and campus life initiatives at the new university, in addition to participating in full-time internships related to their studies at MIT.

To prepare the MIT students for this cross-cultural experience, the MISTI-SLI coordinating team developed a pre-departure training curriculum for the MISTI-SLI program participants focused on Singaporean cultural issues and history, background of the MIT-SUTD collaboration project, and topics in leadership relevant to their work with the new students at SUTD. The cultural components of this curriculum were developed based on Parkinson's "Best Practices for Engineering Study Abroad Programs" [2], while the leadership components were developed based on Komives and Wagner's Social Change Model (SCM) for leadership development [3]. This leadership model was selected based on its change-focused nature; the MISTI-SLI participants and first SUTD student cohort have the opportunity to create a student environment unique in the Singaporean educational context, and a process, value-based system of change is optimal for this type of rapid and creative development.

This paper presents the curriculum developed for the MIT students by the MIT-SUTD Collaboration office as well as the rationale behind the choices made in creating this leadership program for the 2012 MISTI-SLI participants. The leadership training model proposed for the MISTI-SLI program is one possible vehicle to train students for cross-cultural leadership exchange experiences; however, the results of this effort will remain uncertain until years after the MIT students depart from Singapore and the student culture at SUTD can be observed. ◼

REFERENCES

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