

**Program Evaluation of Systems and Operations (PESO)**  
**The Institute for Study Abroad, Butler University (IFSA-Butler)**

**Site:** Heredia, Costa Rica

**Program:** Universidad Nacional Autónoma

**Team:** Melissa Hardin, Ursinus College; Kent Yager, Gettysburg College; Erika Ryser-García, IFSA-Butler

IFSA-Butler emphasizes that Erika Ryser García acted as a support person and not an evaluator. She did not contribute to writing the report, but did lead the IFSA-Butler response.

**Dates:** May 12-16, 2013

On behalf of the Institute for Study Abroad, Butler University (IFSA-Butler), I want to express sincere appreciation for our external team of reviewers: Melissa Hardin, Ph.D., and Kent Yager, Ph.D. They spent countless hours studying the program, performed a thorough review on site, and put great effort into producing a thorough, helpful report. I also want to express IFSA-Butler's gratitude to Teresita Camacho Viquez, Resident Director, and Tracy Quirós Rivera, Assistant Director, for their great efforts in preparing and hosting the evaluation. Their preparation and dedication greatly facilitated the evaluation. The on-site visit was productive and pleasant all around. Finally, I want to thank all of our colleagues at the Universidad Nacional and throughout Costa Rica that contributed to making this a thorough review, and especially for their high-quality work that allows us to hold the kind of program we envision, and for their on-going support as we carry out this program each semester.

IFSA-Butler accepts this report, and believes it accurately reflects the program. We have already made some adjustments to the program and have plans for addressing other elements of the report. Following, also highlighted in orange, are our responses to specific elements.

### **PROGRAM OVERVIEW**

IFSA Universidad Nacional is a semester or academic year study abroad program in association with the Universidad Nacional Autónoma (UNA) located in Heredia, Costa Rica that is administered by a ¾ time Resident Director and a full time Assistant Director onsite and supervised by the Director of Latin American Programs in Indianapolis. All program participants take a closed four credit advanced Spanish language course. Depending on their interests, background, and needs, students complete their course load with 11 to 12 additional credits earned in classes selected from several customized IFSA courses (also conducted in Spanish) that give context to their Costa Rican experience and/or the full curriculum offered by the host university. In order to facilitate language acquisition and cultural adaptation, all students are placed individually in carefully selected family home-stays where they enjoy a private bedroom, take all meals and are included in the family's daily life. The academic program is supplemented by robust co- and extra-curricular offerings including excursions, volunteer and service opportunities, and social events planned and executed or at least facilitated and monitored by the local

IFSA program staff. Various aspects of the program and its staff members are evaluated internally at regular intervals and changes are routinely made based on the results.

### **PROTOCOL AND PREPARATION**

This is the first external review the IFSA Universidad Nacional program has undergone. The Protocol for Evaluating Programs and Program Evaluation of Systems and Operations (PESO) followed herein were provided to the reviewers by IFSA-Butler. The members of the site visit team were

- Melissa Hardin, Ph.D. ([mhardin@ursinus.edu](mailto:mhardin@ursinus.edu)), Chair  
Assistant Dean for International Studies / Assistant Professor of Spanish (Visiting)  
Ursinus College
- Kent Yager, Ph.D. ([kyager@gettysburg.edu](mailto:kyager@gettysburg.edu))  
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- Erika Ryser García ([eryser@ifsa-butler.org](mailto:eryser@ifsa-butler.org))  
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Melissa Hardin occupies one of two seats representing the Mid-Atlantic on the IFSA National Advisors Council (NAC) Executive Committee (EX COM). Kent Yager is a member of the IFSA NAC Latin American Advisory Committee (LAAC). A member of his institution (Gettysburg) holds the other Mid-Atlantic seat on the NAC. As an IFSA staff member who is not based at the site, Erika Ryser García acted as a support person and not an evaluator or team leader.

In preparation for the site visit, the evaluators studied program materials provided by Erika Ryser García of IFSA-Butler including the following:

- Annual report, SWOT and other evaluations
- Statistical information regarding participants during the three most recent years
- Student program and course evaluations
- Pre-departure advising emails and newsletters
- Orientation materials
- Program handbooks
- Syllabi and course materials
- Faculty and staff curriculum vitae
- Information on co-curricular and student life programs and resources
- Health and safety information
- Emergency plans

The external review team leader also contacted 25 sending institutions and solicited their feedback. These were all the institutions that had sent two or more students to the program in the previous three years. Five responded: American University, The University of Virginia, Duquesne University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Drake University.

In advance of the site visit IFSA staff contacted current program participants, Universidad Nacional Autónoma (UNA) faculty and staff, as well as other local service providers to arrange meetings and other visits with the reviewers.

During the four-day site review, team members met with staff, students, faculty, and partners and toured sites and facilities in order to gather information and perspectives from various stakeholders. Our schedule included the following:

- Share welcome dinner with IFSA representatives (resident director Teresita Camacho Viquez, assistant director Tracy Quirós Rivera, director of Latin American programs Erika Ryser García, and IFSA-Butler president and CEO Mark Scheid) and guests
- Review the agenda and tour IFSA and UNA facilities
- Discuss orientation, housing, health and safety, academic advising, student services, curriculum, and co- and extra-curricular opportunities including volunteer work/service with IFSA staff
- Meet with half of the currently enrolled IFSA students for an extended debriefing over lunch
- Observe IFSA program classes (Costa Rican Social History, Advanced Spanish, and Ecological Richness of Costa Rica: Threats, Challenges and Perspectives) and UNA classes (Geo-ecology, and Introduction to Linguistics)
- Meet with senior university administrators as well as faculty and staff members and directors from various academic units and divisions (Vida Estudiantil, Bienestar Estudiantil, Estudios Hispánicos, etc.)
- Tour two student homestays and visit with host mothers
- Meet with one student and her volunteer work supervisor at a local organization

The two external reviewers jointly drafted and agreed on commendations and recommendations, which are made part of this report.

## **ORIENTATION**

### **1. Pre-departure Advising:**

The review team was presented with materials sent to students and parents that included regular advising emails and newsletters for each stage of the application, admission and pre-departure process. We found this information to be comprehensive, timely and relevant. There is indeed a lot of it, and we can understand how students may at times feel overwhelmed, but the way that it is broken up and delivered at regular intervals helps to make it less daunting.

In addition to the many electronic and telephonic communications between IFSA Indianapolis staff and students and their families, students receive or gain electronic access to several installments of information, including the Prepare to Study Abroad Handbook. At least one student remarked that the handbook contained information that was outdated; though we could not verify this (perhaps the student was referring to some other document).

In a lunch meeting with ten of the current 22 program participants, students reported that the pre-departure advising they received was outstanding. Many remarked that they were especially happy with IFSA program advisor Eryn Espín-Kudzinski who they said provided them with timely and detailed communications pre-departure (with the exception of one brief out-of-office period during which students said they had some difficulty getting quick responses to their questions). A few students said that Eryn had influenced their selection of IFSA UNA over other IFSA programs. Students also complained unanimously about the delayed posting of UNA program dates, which prevented them from purchasing the lowest advance fare air tickets and making other plans.

**Commendations:** Pre-departure advising and information is plentiful and thorough.

**Recommendation:** Consider consolidating and streamlining the *Preparing to Study Abroad Handbook* and the *Digital Manual/Program Handbook* (described in the Arrival and Orientation section of this report and mentioned again under Program Staff).

**IFSA-Butler Response:** We have created a new organizational structure for our Program Advisors, emphasizing cross-training between programs so that we may maintain efficiency in responding to students if an advisor is away. We have also initiated a review of our advising literature, looking to minimize repetition of information and update the way information is presented to students.

IFSA-Butler posts the program dates as soon as we have them; delays are typically out of our control. However, we note the difficulty this creates for students and will continue to strive to post them as early as possible. We have shared this details with our partners on site and they, too, will continue to do their best to set dates as early as possible.

## **2. Arrival and Orientation:**

IFSA Universidad Nacional offers a unique two week orientation period at two different sites, the first in Monteverde in spring or in Liberia in fall, and the second in Heredia. The goals of this two-part program are to expose students to a rural area of the country, to familiarize them with the natural environment for which Costa Rica is esteemed, to ease their immersion into a Spanish-only atmosphere by focusing their efforts on interactions with a host family and intensive language classes without a full academic course load, and to provide them with essential information to aid their successful transition to life in Heredia.

The students we interviewed recalled the first week with great fondness. It seemed ideally balanced with information sessions, group gatherings, individual time with host families, social outings, and unstructured free time. The second week takes place on site in Heredia once students have moved into the homes where they will spend the remainder of the semester. During the second week students receive detailed explanations of the academic and social life at the university, meet with local students, register for classes, and learn about extra- and co-curricular activities. In all of this programming IFSA UNA staff members take great care to limit whole group gatherings of IFSA students in order to discourage them from forming an exclusive bond with one another that might inhibit their ability to branch out with locals.

One of many examples is the walking tours which are conducted in groups no larger than five IFSA students and led by Costa Rican university students called Amigos Ticos. The Amigos Ticos (who are compensated for their services) also meet with IFSA students several other times during the semester to

help them with registration, lead them on tours of Heredia and San José, take them to lunch, and join them in folk dance lessons and other recreational activities. This kind of ongoing orientation that puts IFSA students in direct and sustained contact with their local peers is one of the many reasons students integrate so fully.

Students made many observations about the orientation program in Monteverde and Heredia. They described the host families in Monteverde as “warm and fuzzy” and “awesome” and said that they felt a genuine and almost immediate connection with them. Several students lamented that just when they began to feel settled into life at Monteverde it was time for them to leave. One student speculated that the positive experience with host families in Monteverde might have had the unintended effect of creating unrealistically high expectations about the host families that awaited them in Heredia whom they initially saw as less endearing. In general, students agreed that the transition from Monteverde to Heredia was much harder than they anticipated, but they quickly added that they ultimately got used to the change. A few students had remained in contact with people in Monteverde and continued to visit them throughout the semester. Despite the emotional adjustment cited, students uniformly praised the Monteverde leg of the program and urged IFSA to retain this component.

Students appreciated the thorough orientation meetings they had at Monteverde and later at UNA but expressed that perhaps there was too much repetition of information. They felt overwhelmed at the orientation with IFSA staff and had difficulty following lectures and presentations given in rapid Spanish. The reviewers surmised that unlike students from competing programs, IFSA students have a program-specific orientation in addition to the one given by the university. That there is repetition from one orientation to another is not necessarily a problem; however, given the students’ reflections on the effectiveness of the information and delivery thereof, IFSA might want to consider other ways to approach this important task in order to hold their attention.

The most important document students receive during their orientation is the *Digital Manual*. This lengthy handbook serves as the primary source of information that introduces students to the staff, program, location and academic and social environment of IFSA Universidad Nacional. The reviewers noted that the manual does an especially good job of pointing out cultural differences and expectations for appropriate behavior and providing detailed descriptions of planned excursions and activities. The explanation of the founding of the UNA also helps to place the institution in a larger social and historical context.

We offer these suggestions for the manual:

- The virtue of the handbook—its thoroughness-- is also its vice. Spanning 162 pages, it is far too long to sustain the attention it deserves. International educators need to be increasingly more aware of the ways that information can best be delivered to a generation of students who typically seek information in quick consultations of dynamic electronic media.
- Shifting from one language to another is a distraction that should be minimized. If there are concerns about students’ comprehension of the information (or if it is to be shared with families or other non-participants), it should be presented in English. Alternatively, if at some point IFSA implements a Spanish-only policy, it can be presented in the target language.
- The manual lacks a table of contents and intuitive organization, and the information contained therein is very repetitive, thus limiting its effectiveness.

- When listing IFSA and UNA staff members, it would be helpful to include a brief clarification of their roles or responsibilities so students have a ready reference of whom to contact for what purpose. This will also help students better understand the relationship between IFSA and UNA.
- Some space can be saved and accuracy preserved by simply including links to internet pages (such as US State Department) rather than summarizing or reproducing the information presented there.

Overall, the review team was impressed by the extensive, varied and thorough approach to orientation seen in the two-week program and concurs with comments made by sending schools that it allows students to get acclimated before starting classes at UNA.

**Commendations:** The unique two-week orientation program is a hallmark of the IFSA-Butler experience that is well worth the resources required to run it. This program sets IFSA-Butler apart from its competitors and adds value to the student experience.

**Recommendations:**

Explore ways to prepare students for the adjustment from life in the country (homestays) to life in the city (homestays).

Continue considering ways to synthesize and deliver orientation information. Much of the information contained in the *Digital Manual* is repeated in the *Preparing to Study Abroad Handbook*. These documents should be consolidated. The *Digital Manual* seems to take an inordinate number of staff hours to update and revise and is practically rewritten from one semester to another. We suggest IFSA consolidate and maintain this information in a way that does not suppose such an undue burden on local staff.

**IFSA-Butler Response:** In addition to reviewing our written advising information for better efficiency and organization, we have made the following changes to the Digital Manual (also known as the Program Handbook):

- We eliminated redundancy and unnecessary information, and included links to other resources where we thought that was appropriate, reducing the size by half.
- It now has a Table of Contents and intuitive organization, and is all in English.
- It is now structured in a way that minimizes the changes needing to be made, and will only review it once per year instead of twice.

Regarding repetition during orientation, we use that as a tool for students to acquire and internalize information. We have applied different methods during orientation: experts' lectures, UNA students' lectures and participation in activities, games, workshops, role plays, etc., that we change every semester according to how well they work the previous semester. Students rarely have questions or comments. As the evaluators have recommended, we have thought about new ways to help them in this process - for example, a game of final questions and rewards. This may help improve students' attention and give more importance to the information they receive. Also, we are paying more attention to the pitch, volume, pace of voice, and vocabulary used by our lecturers.

The "Amigo Tico" project has been a great success; the fact that they are the same age makes IFSA students immediately warm up to them. IFSA Students pay attention to their advice, and for this reason, we are planning to incorporate these students more into the orientation lectures. IFSA students love

them and it is very gratifying to see how quick they connect to each other and become friends they trust and feel safe with.

## **ACADEMICS**

### **3. Academics:**

Certain study abroad programs have developed a reputation as a place where students can boost their GPA. This is not the case with the IFSA UNA Costa Rica program. Statistics provided by IFSA on student GPAs prior to IFSA study in Costa Rica and during their IFSA semester indicate only minor changes between prior mean GPA and IFSA mean GPA for each group each semester over the last three academic years. Over this time 56 students had a higher IFSA GPA than their prior GPA and 43 showed decreases. Students' home institution GPAs and their IFSA GPAs are very comparable.

As in all IFSA programs, students are required to take a Spanish language class. In addition, they choose their remaining four classes from IFSA program classes and classes in the Universidad Nacional Autónoma (UNA). These options provide students with a wide range of classes to choose from. Given the large number of options, advising is of extreme importance in providing students with sufficient information to help them choose the appropriate subject matter and difficulty level of classes for them to be successful and to have them approved by the home institution. Language issues, advising, program classes, UNA classes and the UNA-IFSA relationship are all important elements within academics. We address these elements below.

**Commendations:** There is no grade inflation as compared to students' home institution GPA.

**Recommendation:** None

### **4. Language Commitment, Testing, and Placement:**

We agree with IFSA that the incorporation of a Spanish language pre- and post-test is important for measuring students' linguistic progress and for initial placement. The recent incorporation of STAMP is an important step in this direction. Erika and Teresita reported to us that initially, students did not seem to take the post-test seriously. This was indicated in many post-test scores that were the same as or lower than pre-test scores. More recently (Semester II [fall], 2012), taking the post-test was no longer obligatory. IFSA staff members explain to those students who choose to take the post-test that the test is beneficial to them in that their scores are sent to their home institution. With these minor changes the second 2012 semester's post-test scores seemed to be a more realistic reflection of the students' language change (i.e. mostly improvement).

IFSA already is aware of the importance of these scores in advertising the program. It is important for them to continue to monitor the seriousness with which students take the post-test and to look for additional ways to motivate the students to do their best. One possibility could be to offer students a certificate that shows their STAMP pre- and post-test scores. We believe that IFSA should move toward full participation on both pre- and post-tests because it will give a more accurate measure of the entire group's progress. Of course, it will only be more accurate if students are motivated to do well and therefore take the tests seriously.

Teresita and Tracy work diligently to keep the IFSA office a Spanish-only environment, thereby emphasizing the importance of actively working on improving one's Spanish. Teresita reports that each semester the group's character is unique. Often groups are very motivated to speak only Spanish. Other groups, for example, 2013 Semester I [spring], are a constant challenge. IFSA will need to continue to explore ways to motivate students to use Spanish.

**Commendations:** Student pre- to post-test scores have improved recently. IFSA is motivating students to do their best on the post-test and placing emphasis on keeping the IFSA office a Spanish-only environment.

**Recommendation:** Continue to explore ways to motivate students for the STAMP tests and move toward full participation.

**IFSA-Butler Response:** We have initiated a year-long dialogue about the use of Spanish in our Latin American study abroad programs, and how to continue motivating students to improve language skills. In Costa Rica, the test is no longer presented as optional, so most students are completing pre- and post-tests.

## 5. Program Classes:

All students are required to take the Advanced Spanish class. In addition, they may choose to take one or both of the following two program classes: Costa Rican Social History and Ecological Richness of Costa Rica: Threats, Challenges and Perspectives.

The director of Estudios Hispánicos, the department that designs its courses specifically for foreign students, and two of its professors—the two that teach the Advanced Spanish classes—indicated that the level of the students in one of the classes was truly advanced while the level of the other one was advanced in name only because its students were not truly advanced. They suggested that an advanced intermediate class be offered when the students' linguistic level was not truly advanced. It was suggested that perhaps the students' home institutions might not grant credit if the Spanish class was not at the advanced level, since a prerequisite to applying to this program is four semesters of college/university Spanish. Communication on this topic between Estudios Hispánicos and IFSA should help remediate this situation.

Both evaluators observed the less advanced Advanced Spanish class, but since students gave oral presentations it was impossible to observe other types of activities. Student-professor interaction was limited, but did seem appropriate. One evaluator observed part of the other Advanced Spanish class and reported that the professor conducted the class well and that the class was well received by the students. We wondered whether more activities that are more student-centered and less professor-centered might help these classes. However, we did not observe enough of these classes to be sure of what percent of class generally was student-centered and what percent was professor-centered. This professor of the more advanced class has taught with IFSA for a number of years. The professor of the less advanced section is new to IFSA and is relatively new to teaching. Both classes seem to provide students with good linguistic input, practice and cultural experiences.

One evaluator observed a portion of the Costa Rican Social History class. In this session, the professor projected text from a Costa Rican short story from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He frequently involved the IFSA students in the discussion as he explained the non-standard Costa Rican vocabulary from the text. The

professor maintained a high level of energy and enthusiasm that was reflected in his students' attention and participation. The subject matter from this class is particularly useful for students to understand their Costa Rican cultural and linguistic surroundings.

One reviewer observed a portion of the third program class, Ecological Richness of Costa Rica. It was interesting to see that this class was a mix of IFSA and Costa Rican (Tico) students. The reviewer came into the class during a presentation on eco-tourism given by a guest speaker. This dynamic speaker presented interesting information while projecting a slide show as visual support. After a short break, the regular UNA professor resumed the class. He spoke about what the class would be doing and presented a slide show of photos taken during a recent class field trip. The class curriculum is appealing to and benefits both the Tico and IFSA students. The inspired decision to allow Tico students to enroll in this program class provides both Tico and American students an additional opportunity to get to know one another in the classroom and during the class field trips. A few IFSA students that we interviewed indicated that they maintained Tico friendships that were initiated in the class and on the field trips. We noticed some issues with the class that IFSA and UNA have already addressed. Because of this class's curriculum and its combined enrollment, we suggest that IFSA continue to explore ways to make it succeed.

One evaluator observed part of a regular university course, Geoecología, in which one IFSA student was enrolled. The class was quite full with approximately 25 students sitting at desks that formed a large circle around the room. The professor moved about, engaging students in a lively discussion about a recent field trip they had. Students volunteered comments and asked frequent questions. Although the atmosphere seemed very relaxed, the reviewer did not observe the IFSA student contribute to the discussion, however, the student commented later that she felt welcome and had made several friends in the class. She said it was interesting to learn about the natural environment and threats to it alongside native Tico students. She added that her Spanish had improved greatly from taking the course.

**Commendations:** The curriculum content and level is appropriate. Ecological Richness of Costa Rica has great potential—its co-enrollment is particularly innovative.

**Recommendations:** Verify that classes, particularly the language classes, are sufficiently student-centered.

**IFSA-Butler Response:** Building on the potential that the Ecological Richness class offers the program, we have created a new concentration in environmental studies, starting Spring/Semester I, 2014, centered on this class. We are sharing the recommendation with our partners in Costa Rica so that we may work together to improve the experience for students.

## **6. Internships, Field Research, and Community-based Learning:**

Although there are no formal academic credit-bearing internships, students are encouraged to identify areas of interest that IFSA program staff members use to connect with or create unpaid work opportunities at local businesses and organizations. These placements are treated as formal commitments, and students pledge to dedicate an agreed upon number of work hours and are subsequently held accountable for fulfilling them. One of the reviewers visited one student who was participating in what IFSA calls trabajo voluntario at the local Chamber of Commerce. The student demonstrated a project she was working on which involved the creation of electronic documents and templates, "cold calling" local businesses, and reporting the information she gathered to her supervisor.

There was an opportunity to speak briefly with the site supervisor to learn the role the student played in the organization. At that moment he invited the student to participate in an upcoming dinner event so that she could meet some of the business leaders with whom the organization was working and thus see the fruits of her labor. In a later conversation with the student she said that the experience of working at a professional organization was at first intimidating but also extremely rewarding and very relevant for her major and future career in business and economics.

Apart from the confusing misnomer, the only downside to the “volunteer work” the reviewer witnessed was that it could not count for college credit despite the fact that the student was working upwards of 15 hours per week. The nature of the work certainly seems credit-worthy. If IFSA were to expand or standardize the hours and reinforce these experiences with a structure including a learning outcomes statement, academic or theoretical underpinnings, and a more clearly articulated intern-supervisor-host agreement, it could very well become a highlight of the academic program. Several sending schools echoed this sentiment and at least one education abroad professional said she recommends all her students to participate in the trabajo voluntario program because of the value it adds to the overall experience. Another education abroad professional relayed that her former student espoused the benefits of her internship experience with the Costa Rican Ministry of Foreign Commerce for business Spanish and professional development. We urge IFSA therefore to pursue this opportunity aggressively in order to strengthen the academic offerings and attract more advanced Spanish students who have other academic or professional interests.

Unfortunately, the reviewers did not have an opportunity to discuss at length the potential to develop independent and/or field research opportunities for IFSA students with UNA faculty, but this is another area that IFSA should explore as it could attract students in academic areas in which UNA has a strong curriculum and thus garner even stronger support among sending school faculty, especially those in typically underrepresented STEM fields.

**Commendations:** IFSA staff members customize meaningful volunteer work opportunities for students and instill in them an appropriate sense of responsibility and accountability for their work.

**Recommendations:**

IFSA should give immediate priority to the development of a full-fledged internship program with academic support and professional oversight.

It should also explore the possibility of creating opportunities for independent or field research and/or facilitated credit-bearing community-based learning projects.

**IFSA-Butler Response:** We are exploring how to add an internship component to the environmental studies concentration. We also created a new concentration in Teacher Education to start in spring/semester 1, 2014, which will have a community-based learning component. We intend to build on those experiences to further respond to the recommendations above.

**7. Host University:**

**UNA classes.** There are hundreds of UNA classes in which IFSA students can and do enroll. Some classes are limited to students that have a truly advanced level of Spanish and/or a strong background in the

subject matter. However, many classes are accessible to students of normal Spanish-speaking ability. Students we spoke with generally did not find the subject matter particularly challenging, but given that the classes were taught in Spanish and directed to native speakers of Spanish, they found the overall experience to be appropriately challenging. None of the students we interviewed complained that the classes were too challenging. One student who was in a more advanced UNA class indicated that the level of the subject matter was appropriate and she did not find language to be a problem. This student was a heritage speaker of Spanish, which may have given her a linguistic advantage in this advanced class. The range of class difficulty seems to be appropriate. Students who want more challenging classes can find them, but for the most part the first and second year UNA classes are appropriate for most IFSA students.

Other institutions that send students to IFSA Costa Rica gave us little feedback. However, one school did say that their students complained that academic integrity was viewed differently at UNA. For example, students have reported that Costa Rican students are allowed to cite Wikipedia and they can quite freely paraphrase in their papers without citing their sources. The latter would be considered plagiarism in the U.S. IFSA students should be made aware of these differences, but we do not see them as greatly affecting the quality of education that UNA offers IFSA students.

When IFSA students have trouble in their classes, IFSA has a system of tutoring ready to help them. The professors we met from Estudios Hispánicos praised IFSA's tutoring and mentioned that UNA also had ways to help students (e.g., meet with professors during office hours or through an UNA tutoring system). As far as we could tell, students take advantage of IFSA's tutors, but do not use the UNA tutoring system. IFSA students told us that they found the program tutoring system to be helpful and this was also reported by a sending institution.

Out of personal interest, one reviewer observed an Introduction to Linguistics class in the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras. There were no American students in the class, but the professor taught the class at a level that would have been comprehensible to motivated foreign students. If it is typical of introductory classes at UNA, foreign students should have no problem finding courses they can succeed in.

In one successful case of integration into an UNA class, an IFSA student read the English version of the introduction to the professor's thesis. Since it was almost incomprehensible (the professor had used Google Translator), the student offered to translate it. The professor was so appreciative that she invited the student to her thesis defense. The student felt very honored. Another student asked permission to write her e-mail on the board during her UNA class in case anyone wanted help with English. She immediately had five people who were interested. Clearly, opportunities to integrate with Tico students abound for motivated students.

IFSA orientation materials clearly describe how important group work is in the UNA and they give suggestions on how to approach this. IFSA students indicate that their orientation also covers this topic. Even so, they often find it to be one of the most difficult aspects of their UNA classes. The IFSA students don't feel comfortable taking a leadership role in their groups, but they are frustrated in the instances when none of the Tico students organize the group either. We don't know how the IFSA orientation covers the group work issue, but perhaps presenting them with a role-play activity might help them deal with certain difficult group situations.

IFSA students expressed some discomfort at the way Tico students sometimes act in class, particularly noting times when students chat while the professor is speaking, or when leaving for the restroom in the middle of class. IFSA students may benefit from further orientation about what to expect in class,

including guidelines for what is culturally-appropriate (or culturally-tolerated). It may also be helpful to point out that IFSA students, typically juniors or seniors, will often be in classrooms with first-year Tico students who are themselves adjusting to a new culture (that of the UNA).

**UNA-IFSA Relationship.** The director of the Heredia IFSA program, Teresita Camacho Viquez, has developed an excellent relationship with the UNA administration and faculty. Evidence of this was our lunch with the university Rector, Vice Rector of Academic Affairs and officials from other offices that deal directly with the IFSA program. It was an impressive sign of support for the program and specifically of Teresita that these important officials took time from their normal activities to meet with us. They all spoke glowingly of the IFSA program and staff and considered IFSA to be innovative in how it worked with UNA to their mutual benefit. The Rector indicated that she looked forward to continuing this relationship and hoped to see continuing innovation in it. She is interested in having some sort of reciprocity. This may mean that she would like to create more opportunities for Tico students to study abroad. We believe that it is important for IFSA to clarify what the Rector means by reciprocity and explore what possibilities exist to move in this direction. If reciprocity indeed means more study abroad opportunities for Ticos, and IFSA and UNA can develop them together, this should further improve an already excellent relationship. One important first step in demonstrating reciprocity would be for IFSA to share feedback from this report with UNA administrators, as they demonstrated a keen interest in learning more about the findings of the external review.

Our meetings with the Director of Estudios Hispánicos and two professors from that program (the two that teach the IFSA Advanced Spanish classes) also indicated that they all held Teresita and the IFSA program in high regard. They praised how the IFSA staff worked with them on curriculum and on how individual IFSA students were doing in their classes. When it became apparent that a particular instructor from Estudios Hispánicos was not working out well in an IFSA Advanced Spanish class, all parties ultimately agreed to change the instructor. This is strong evidence that relations function very well and to the IFSA students' benefit.

Below we mention some difficulties that a few IFSA students encounter in the UNA class registration process. Once again, it is the relationship that Teresita has developed with UNA that has allowed IFSA to successfully place students into classes they need for their home institution requirements in spite of UNA limitations to foreign student enrollment in these classes. (Most classes do not need this type of intervention for IFSA students to enroll.) It is clear that UNA sees the IFSA relationship as being beneficial to its needs and those of its students and works with Teresita for the benefit of IFSA and its students.

Everything we observed and all of our conversations with the relevant parties indicate that the UNA-IFSA relationship is strong, effective and mutually beneficial.

**Commendations:** The IFSA director, Teresita, has a very effective working relationship with UNA.

**Recommendation:** Explore forms of reciprocity with UNA as described by the Rector.

**IFSA-Butler Response:** UNA administrators have received a copy of this report and have been invited to discuss it.

Universidad Nacional has very strict norms and we explain this to students in our Lecture "Academic Differences" during Orientation. This is also in our Digital Handbook: *"Plagio (plagiarism): As in any other academic institution, plagiarism at UNA is a serious offense. You will be severely reprimanded and may*

*fail your assignment and/or course if you have misrepresented yourself or downloaded information from the Internet presenting it as yours. You may not contest a grade that is the result of plagiarism. Your home school will be notified in all cases of accused academic dishonesty." This is considered Grave Misconduct punishable with suspension (Art. 54: Faltas Graves, Reglamento Del Régimen Disciplinario De La Universidad Nacional).*

Referring group work at UNA and the Academic Differences students should expect, we are planning as an interactive workshop with UNA students to help explain this situation.

## **8. Academic Advising:**

When students arrive in Heredia they begin a two week orientation, which includes an academic advising component. IFSA staff explains the program courses and the UNA courses. In particular, the staff emphasizes how to choose UNA classes and how the UNA registration process works. Students should have seen much of this information in the pre-departure booklet *Preparing to Study Abroad: Costa Rica* that they receive. Information in this booklet is quite clear as to the registration process for UNA classes.

However, another pre-departure advising e-mail ("d advising e-mails" in the e-mail that Erika sent us) has a section related to the "shopping period," a phrase and concept that students report as causing serious confusion and frustration. This e-mail indicates that students "...have a few weeks to try out different classes. This is called the 'shopping period' where you will literally shop for the classes you will take the remainder of the semester." (p. 10 of e-mail). This seems to be a concept that IFSA uses for a number of Latin American programs and seems to frequently be used in study abroad offices at U.S. institutions when advising students. IFSA students from a variety of home universities stated that before leaving the U.S. they thought that this shopping period would provide them a great deal of flexibility for class selection in the UNA. In spite of information that IFSA staff provided during the first week of in-country orientation, many students went into the UNA registration process thinking that they could freely add and drop classes during the first two weeks.

There are many factors that limit this shopping period (international student quotas in some classes, GPA priorities, Spanish placement test scores, limiting consequences on national students when foreign students over-enroll, then drop classes, etc.), but IFSA students are frustrated when they are not allowed to freely over-enroll (i.e. enroll in more than five classes), so they can drop unwanted classes during the shopping period. (Apparently, students add classes during the first week of the shopping period and normally can only drop classes during the second week.) It would be very helpful to have written on one page all of the factors that might limit students from freely enrolling and over-enrolling in classes during the enrollment period. Often American students do not feel that the information is real until they see it written; therefore hearing it during orientation appears not to be sufficient for most students. This information page may already exist, but we did not see it online, in the pre-departure advising materials, the Costa Rica Handbook, nor in the materials provided to us. The limitations of the shopping period should be made clearer to avoid misunderstanding, frustration and registration problems. This may be a central IFSA office concern as much as or more than a Costa Rica one.

Many IFSA students found that grouping two or three IFSA students with a Costa Rican (Tico) student was very helpful in the class selection process. These students provided insight about courses and UNA that were not readily available from other sources.

IFSA students were uniformly frustrated by the late publication of UNA classes. Obviously, this is not something that IFSA staff has control over, but perhaps they can campaign for the semester class schedules to appear earlier. During the current semester one student reported that the schedule did appear earlier than many students thought, but the new class schedule was listed with the previous semester's title, so it might have gone unnoticed. The IFSA-Costa Rica site materials clearly describe this problem for students and try to prepare them to deal with it, but even so, the students end up frustrated.

After speaking with IFSA students and on-site staff and with UNA staff in the office of Bienestar Estudiantil (Student Wellbeing), it is clear that the IFSA staff actively and effectively intervenes on behalf of students so that they can enroll in the UNA classes for which they have a demonstrated need (e.g., home institution requirement) in spite of the many UNA limiting factors. Teresita has developed strong ties with UNA administrators and faculty and uses these ties to the benefit of the program and its students. In addition, Teresita and Tracy are readily available to students for academic advising and any other need they may have.

**Commendations:** Open communication between IFSA staff and students is evident. Partnering IFSA students with a Tico student for registration purposes works well. IFSA staff members successfully intervene with UNA on behalf of IFSA students.

**Recommendation:** IFSA needs to clear up the misconceptions surrounding the “shopping period.” If this extends beyond the Costa Rica program, then it might best be addressed with changes originated at the Indianapolis office. For Costa Rica, a one page (or two—we realize that this is a bit complex) document that includes not only the registration process, but also the registration limitations (especially to the shopping period) might facilitate registration, or at least reduce frustration and misconceptions among students.

Relevant excerpts from IFSA materials:

From: *Preparing to Study Abroad: Costa Rica* (p. 11)

You may not learn exactly what courses you can register for before arriving abroad. Because of differences in the academic system and the language, you will need to spend a few days in a variety of classes to see which is the best fit for you. Local degree students are not given this privilege. Because you will temporarily occupy space in a class on the roster when you do this, there are limits to how many classes you can choose to visit.

From: d advising e-mails (p. 10)

### **Shopping Period**

At the beginning of the semester, you will have a few weeks to try out different classes. This is called the “shopping period” where you will literally shop for the classes you will take the remainder of the semester. It is a good idea to try out as many classes as you can. During this time, speak with the professor and other students in the class to get a good idea of what the course entails. Be sure to drop any unwanted classes before the established deadline.

**IFSA-Butler Response:** Even though the Academic Offer appears on the UNA web page, it is provisional; UNA sends the final one, approximately 3 weeks prior to students' arrival. This offer is different in

spring and fall; students need to make sure they are choosing the right semester courses. Another challenge we have is that students have pre-approved courses, which are typically from *Estudios Generales*; these are sometimes too basic for students, therefore our program policy is to allow each student to take no more than one class from *Generales*. This policy is available on our website where students search for classes pre-departure. Students who have pre-approved courses from other Faculties find the registration process to be much smoother.

Last semester we implemented a pre-registration day during the first week of orientation; this was very helpful because when students registered at UNA the following week, they had most of their courses chosen and the process was less overwhelming to them.

We created a newsletter covering registration and academic matters, with detailed and clear information covering academic information, courses and syllabi; shopping period and course withdrawal information. We also reinforce this during orientation.

According to our negotiations with UNA, students have a two week shopping period and approximately five weeks of justified withdrawal.

## **PROGRAM OFFICE**

### **9. Program Staff:**

The IFSA UNA program is managed remarkably well by a small team of administrators, and it was clear to the reviewers that they could do an even better job with a bit more support. Earlier we have mentioned the need to revise and streamline the information contained in the *Preparing to Study Abroad Handbook* and the *Digital Manual*. In reading these and other materials we gained a true appreciation for the number of hours of work it represents and reached the conclusion that this particular task must be minimized in order for staff to dedicate themselves more fully to more important and urgent matters. The same should be said of other forms of information gathering and dissemination, most notably with regard to electronic media. It simply is not a good use of non-specialist staff time and IFSA resources for them to devote so much time and energy to keeping up with the program web page, Facebook groups, and other sites. We suggest, therefore, that IFSA consider ways to support the local staff by delegating some of these responsibilities to other IFSA staff members who have more expertise in these areas (perhaps in the Indianapolis office) and providing training in technologies that can help the staff to perform their many duties more efficiently.

Another administrative mammoth is the process by which students fill out the course registration form. IFSA Costa Rica staff members are tasked with reviewing it and then entering all the detailed information into the Indianapolis database. Surely it would be easier for the local staff to review the information and send it on to Indianapolis where it can then be entered into the database.

Despite the painstaking administrative work that Teresita and Tracy perform on these minutiae, they manage to succeed in the more important job of creating an atmosphere for all stakeholders—colleagues and students alike—that is exceedingly pleasant, supportive and of a high standard. The reviewers have attempted to make abundantly clear the fundamental role played by the IFSA professional staff in every aspect of the Heredia program. We are absolutely convinced that the overwhelming success of this program is in large part owing to the dedication, energy and resourcefulness of Teresita Camacho Viquez, resident director since 1996. Students, colleagues and

program partners showered both Teresita and assistant Tracy Quirós Rivera (assistant director since 2011) with praise and gratitude. One student told reviewers that when she experienced a problem with her homestay family on a Sunday, she called Teresita and spoke with her for hours until the problem was resolved. The other students added that they, too, found Teresita always to be available and helpful. It was clear in our interactions with UNA faculty, staff and administrators (including those at the highest levels) that Teresita enjoys their respect and has earned their trust and collaboration. Similarly, Tracy has established a remarkable rapport with and earned the admiration of students. Her enthusiasm is contagious and her ability to show students the positive side of every experience is nothing short of inspiring. Both Teresita and Tracy demonstrate an unsurpassed commitment to the students, the program and the organization. Sending schools also gave their strongest endorsement of these two program staff members.

**Commendations:** IFSA can boast that it is well represented by a capable and dedicated professional staff.

**Recommendation:** Recognize and reward staff members generously and provide opportunities for ongoing training and professional development.

**IFSA-Butler Response:** We have addressed several issues of workload. Among measures taken are that we provided new guidelines and support that limits the amount of work necessary on site for the electronic requirements. The on-line course registration form was particularly cumbersome just before the reviewers arrived, because it had just gone live and needed a bulk of information entered by hand. In each future semester, the amount of time the on-site staff needs to spend on this form will be minimized. We have also provided some extra training and professional development support, and will continue to do so.

#### **10. Office Facilities:**

The IFSA office is located at a distance of a 5-10 minute walk from the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras on the main UNA campus. This is a very convenient location for students. It is not so close as to be conducive to having a group of American students constantly congregating there (and potentially speaking in English to each other), but it is easily accessible when there is a reason for making a visit. The office is composed of two rooms, a meeting/project room and an office for Teresita and Tracy. UNA provides these rooms to IFSA and they are located in the basement of a building that UNA uses for other offices. Currently, there are no windows, but UNA has begun working on adding a small one. The size is appropriate for everyday work when there are small numbers of visitors. However, it would be very difficult to squeeze the entire group of 22 IFSA students (2013 Semester I [spring]) into the office for meetings or activities for the entire group.

The office does not have computers or a printer for student use. Teresita believes that having this equipment in the office would attract students to the office and away from opportunities to meet Tico students on campus. Furthermore, UNA has eight libraries with computers for student use and there are a number of computer laboratories on campus as well. In addition, the entire campus has Wi-Fi.

Teresita says that IFSA has been very forthcoming with all of their office equipment requests. Teresita and Tracy have made their small space quite welcoming.

**Commendations:** The small office space is used well.

**Recommendation:** None

**IFSA-Butler Response:** UNA added two windows to the office; one for the meeting room and the other one in our office. This has been a great change to the office and it is a very comfortable space. We usually use the meeting room for tutorials or small meetings, or for students to use it as a study place. Meetings with students are usually carried out in an event room in a cafeteria.

## **CO-CURRICULAR**

### **11. Housing:**

Homestays are required for all program participants, and based on student and staff feedback the review team concluded that this program feature is one of its greatest strengths. IFSA program staff members do not simply cede all housing assignment responsibility to the UNA housing coordinator; rather, they work closely with her in order to handpick the families with which IFSA students are placed. Students commented overwhelmingly that the host families in both Heredia and in Monteverde were the highlight of their semester. They did note a few minor issues and make some suggestions, however. For example, upon returning to Heredia from Monteverde students felt that their meeting with their new host families was very abrupt: they said they simply got off the bus and into host family cars. They suggested a gentler transition such as a brief ice-breaker reception in the hotel before moving into their new homes. Despite what students saw as a small hiccup in their arrival, they commented that their homestays in Heredia were very good, the food excellent, and the families engaging and attentive. Several students remarked that their host family members regularly conversed with them about politics and current events and that this enabled them to participate in their classes and everyday interactions with Ticos more fully. For example, one sending school shared a comment from a former student who said that his home stay family had included him in their daily lives and networks and invited him to church, family gatherings, and other community events. An education abroad professional from another sending school said that the homestays were an excellent way for students to improve their Spanish and learn about the local culture.

The review team was able to visit two family homestays in the company of the UNA homestay coordinator. She emphasized how important it was for students to fill out the pre-arrival housing questionnaire accurately and completely in order to create a good match. At each home the host mother received us in the living room, offered us refreshments and joined us in conversation. They then invited us to tour the house, including the bedroom and bathroom provided for the host student. The houses were located within a reasonable distance from the university and easily accessible by public transportation and were quite attractive, comfortable, and at or above local standards of living. Both homestay mothers had years of experience hosting US students, many of them in partnership with IFSA-Butler. When asked about the greatest challenges of hosting US students, one host mother affirmed that students who have untreated mental health issues pose a significant challenge and at times a threat to host families who are not made aware of students' needs. She had had an unfortunate experience hosting a student (not an IFSA program participant) who discontinued her medication, fell into depression, and finally had to be removed from the home. The housing coordinator was involved in that incident and was able to explain the standard measures that were taken to remove the student from the home and seek the health care that she needed. Unfortunately, these experiences are becoming increasingly more common, and homestay families understandably express growing fears about their ability to adequately provide for these students. The housing coordinator was aware of the restrictions

that limit IFSA's ability to gather and share protected student information, but she nevertheless asserted that without information about student health and/or appropriate training on how to respond to undiagnosed or untreated psychological or other health conditions, homestay families cannot fully prepare to receive and support students. For example, students who have addictions may need additional support that families may not be able to give. IFSA and other international education organizations should recognize this complex issue for the significant threat that it poses to the viability and continued success of traditional family homestays. The review team noted with interest that the current homestay coordinator at UNA has an academic and practical background in psychology and counseling, and wondered if IFSA might be able to work with UNA to take better advantage of her (and/or other professionals') training in the administration of its homestay program and training of families.

In addition to attending to the physical and psychological health needs of students, the homestay coordinator and IFSA program staff take great care to ensure that students are placed with homestay families who will respect their religious, ethnic, and racial backgrounds, dietary requirements, as well as sexual or gender identities. The homestay coordinator and Teresita Camacho Viquez routinely intervene when problems arise between host and student. If they determine that the differences are irreconcilable, they identify an alternate homestay for the student. Finally, the UNA homestay coordinator and IFSA program staff conduct separate student evaluations of families and change their rosters accordingly. This procedure, although redundant, ensures that IFSA exercises the control necessary over this important aspect of the student experience.

Especially commendable features of IFSA homestays:

- Only one international student is housed in each homestay
- All meals are provided
- Students have a private bedroom with adequate study and storage space
- Students are included in family activities
- Families are committed to speaking Spanish
- Homestays provide a safe environment for successful student supervision and adjustment

**Commendations:** The homestays are a well-administered and essential component of the student's experience, cultural adjustment and language acquisition.

**Recommendation:** Pay heed to the legitimate needs and concerns of host families.

**IFSA-Butler Response:** The Housing Department at Universidad Nacional uses a protocol to recruit and keep families. They recruit families once a year; once they are selected, they take an induction workshop. These families start with summer groups that stay for 6 weeks or so, to warm up to the experience, and then, according to their performance they are considered for semester groups. They also receive an un-announced visit by the Housing Department once a semester to verify quality. Families must provide three meals a day, laundry, internet, a locked drawer or cabinet, a private room, hot water to shower, room cleaning, and house keys. They must include students in family events and daily activities, and drop them off at the airport when they leave the country. All families receive two

additional workshops a year about different topics that host families deal with, such as drugs, sexuality, conflict resolution, self-esteem, eating disorders, and natural disasters.

Incidents are treated very carefully and we have a protocol with the housing department. The first person to learn about the problem (either IFSA or UNA Housing) must communicate with the other; both sides always work together.

Students evaluate their families twice per semester: one month after arrival and one month before leaving. Families also evaluate students. This helps keep a database of families and issues that students present to be better prepared for future cases.

We understand the difficult situation the families face when they don't have sufficient information about a student's health. We provide as much information as possible to the families. Our information gathering and sharing practices closely follow industry best practices. We will continue to consider ways to improve this process to maximize student and family well-being.

## **12. Excursions:**

In addition to the first week of orientation, which takes place in either Monteverde (spring) or Liberia (fall) and could be considered an excursion (see section 2: Arrival and Orientation), the program offers two 3-day excursions, one of which is a volunteer experience, a day excursion and a 2-day excursion in connection with the Ecological Richness of Costa Rica class, as seen in the following list:

Gira a Ostional	3 days
Gira a Sarchí : Curso de Español (IFSA)	1 day
Gira de Trabajo Voluntario	3 days
Gira a Talamanca: Curso Riquezas de Costa Rica	2 days

All of these giras involve activities and take students to sites that are uniquely related to Costa Rica's cultural, social and ecological character. The gira to Talamanca taken by the Ecological Richness of Costa Rica class provided excellent opportunities for the Tico and IFSA students from that class to better get to know one another. Students stated that they really enjoy these experiences and thought they were well planned. The only negative comment that many of them made was that one volunteer trip that was offered would have cost them around \$300 dollars, but this was not made clear to them up front. Although it sounded like it was going to be a very interesting trip, we have the impression that all IFSA students who had signed up for it dropped out about a week before it took place, which was when they found out how much it would cost. This caused frustration among some students who were looking forward to making that trip. Clear communication of costs when trips are initially announced should eliminate these frustrations in the future.

**Commendations:** Well planned trips to uniquely appropriate Costa Rican sites are arranged.

**Recommendations:** Insure that flyers and other means of publicizing trips are clear as to their cost to students.

**IFSA-Butler Response:** There is one more excursion of the Program that is not mentioned above:

IFSA-Butler typically includes all program excursions in the program fee. The experience referenced here was an anomaly. We have a Lecture during orientation called Voluntary Work. There are volunteer trips available that are not part of the IFSA-Butler program. We explain to students that they have to pay for volunteer trips, because they are typically hosted by ASVO (Association for National Parks in Costa Rica). ASVO typically charges \$23 per day, including food and lodging. This makes a 3-day trip no more than \$100, including personal expenses. However, the semester in reference, we learned of an opportunity to participate in another trip in a biological field station. This increased the price to \$300.

We will minimize the possibility for this to occur again. The point is well taken about the need for accurate and timely advertising of co-curricular opportunities. We created a newsletter only about volunteering, explaining the options and costs, and clarifying that it is an optional excursion and that it is not included as an IFSA trip.

### **13. Community Engagement:**

In our conversations with students and in our meetings with program staff and reading of the materials provided, the review team found there to be many opportunities for volunteer activities, unpaid work experience, and community engagement, however, the different types of opportunities were confusing and sometimes hard to distinguish from one another. Students sometimes were not aware of what was available and/or did not pursue these opportunities as a result. Other students said that they felt too busy to participate in the individual and relatively unstructured opportunities to engage with the community but were glad that they were available. The various forms of organized community engagement should be articulated more clearly, especially if IFSA is to develop and feature a proper academic credit-bearing internship program.

Students did find great value in those volunteer experiences they chose to join, especially those that were of a collective nature such as the Programa Bandera Azul community and beach beautification projects in which they collaborated with Tico classmates.

Examples of places where students can be placed as listed on the IFSA Universidad Nacional website:

- **Proyecto Esperanza Joven** - Students support rural communities in education, building maintenance and assistance with natural emergencies.
- **Fundación Contra el Cáncer de Mama (FUNDESCO)** - Administrative duties supporting FUNDESCO staff.
- **Fundación Oratorio Don Bosco** - Work with children from high-risk areas through workshops, tutoring and sports.
- **Asociación Voluntaria en Investigación y Desarrollo Ambiental (VIDA)** - Help rural communities with community and environmental service projects.
- **Inbioparque** - Assist with recycling programs, community ecotourism and sustainable development.

As in the case of unpaid trabajo voluntario opportunities, participants are asked to commit to a certain number of hours and are awarded a certificate upon completion. Likewise, IFSA staff members send letters of gratitude to host sites in order to cultivate further collaboration. Such practices demonstrate to students exemplary and replicable models of stewardship.

Another notable approach to volunteer work is the way in which local staff members break up some activities into short term commitments. The goal is to engage students while ensuring their participation and a fruitful and sustainable partnership with the organizer. Students can often extend their participation once the initial commitment has been completed (provided that the site wishes them to continue). Students can choose from among both discrete, one-time activities (such as Tortugas or Isla Venado) and longer-term ones (Escuela de Inglés UNA, MEP, Escuela Neuropsiquiatría, and Residencias Estudiantiles). It appears that up to approximately half of IFSA students sign up for short or longer term volunteer work during any given term.

The array of opportunities for volunteer work and service is impressive, but these various activities need to be more clearly distinguished and articulated and highlighted on the IFSA website and other marketing materials as a way of attracting more prospective students and informing applicants and enrollees of what they can do in the program. Of course, self-motivation to participate is key, but there is no doubt, as one former student remarked, that service opportunities are made readily available for those interested in them.

In addition to volunteer service, students are encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities in the university and local community. A few examples:

- Dance lessons
- Talleres de deportes for a small fee
- Use of university gym and athletic facilities
- Language exchange club (there is a high demand for it among Costa Rican students)

Finally, IFSA students reported that they made good use of their unstructured free time. Many students travel on weekends. There was no indication that this created any sort of conflict with academic or program commitments. On the contrary, IFSA staff members said that many locals leave Heredia on the weekends, so there is no reason students shouldn't do likewise.

In our conversations with UNA staff members, the reviewers heard some concerns about the difficulty of informing students of the multiple opportunities that are available in the critical early part of the term because they have already formed a strong common identity through their intensive 2 week orientation and they may feel overwhelmed and reluctant to get involved in outside activities right away. In addition, UNA staff expressed ambivalence about the notion that all students, both visiting international students (assumed to be of means) and local students (with fewer resources) are subsidized equally for university-supported and limited-enrollment activities.

**Commendations:** The variety of opportunities to engage with the university and local community is outstanding.

**Recommendation:** Study ways to clarify and distinguish these opportunities.

**IFSA-Butler Response:** IFSA-Butler has created a program called Exploring Culture and Community (C&C), which has finished similar pilots in Mexico and England. The initial pilot in Costa Rica is slotted for spring/semester 1, 2015. The C&C gives a framework to co- and extra-curricular, community-based activities, providing organizational structure for getting involved and a forum for guided reflection of students' participation. We anticipate that the C&C will address most of the concerns expressed here.

In the meantime, we are emphasizing greater clarity in the way we present the information to students. We created a digital magazine of places and pictures of IFSA students' experiences with their recommendations, updating info and adding new institutions we work with each semester. We also are aiming to involve the Amigos Ticos with IFSA students' volunteer work.

#### **14. Cross-cultural Learning and Student Transformation:**

Some of the students with whom the review team met reflected on their semester-long stay and suggested a number of ways that IFSA might help them not only to engage with the local community but also to build support among their IFSA peer group. They specifically said that they would appreciate more group debriefings to discuss adjustment issues. Ironically, several students commented that the opportunity to meet with reviewers was helpful to them because it seemed like the first time they were able to share their experiences with one another and discover that they had a lot in common. The review team notes, however, that the Calendario I Semestre 2013 includes group activities such as meals, celebrations and other opportunities to share information. Furthermore, the Vida Estudiantil staff seemed to think that IFSA students needed to be encouraged to break free of their own group more in order to integrate with local students earlier. At least one sending school also intimated that its students do not appear to be making many Costa Rican friends. One way to address these differences of opinion might be to create more or highlight existing opportunities for oral or written reflection on the process of cultural adjustment. Perhaps the UNA housing coordinator with her background in psychology or another faculty member with expertise in intercultural communication could assist with this.

Notwithstanding the desire to connect with their IFSA peers of the current group (we recognize that this may simply be a characteristic of this cohort and not others), students expressed satisfaction with their ability to take the initiative to meet locals on their own. They seemed to do this more successfully outside of class (or at least, outside of certain classes). For example, students said it was easier to interact with Costa Rican peers during outings, volunteer work and excursions than it was to meet them in class (though some did both) since Ticos typically enjoy longstanding friendships with their academic peers that are hard to penetrate. As noted in the Academics section of this report, IFSA students also said they related more to upper class students than to those younger classmates they had in their general education or introductory level courses.

Some evidence of students' perceptions of their integration in the local culture may be seen in the apprehension they expressed about their upcoming re-entry to life back in the US. One student with whom we spoke looked forward to a culture shock workshop offered by her home university; another had the foresight to plan a "soft landing" sabbatical at a lake house before reintegrating with family and friends. Two worried that their plans to begin a domestic internship immediately upon return to the US may have been ill-conceived given their fears for re-adjustment. Several talked about how their semester in Costa Rica had raised their awareness of the materialism in US culture and anti-American sentiment abroad. One was dismayed by what she saw as evidence of globalization and US cultural domination in Costa Rica. Another said she had acquired a deeper appreciation for diversity while yet another remarked that her experience as a foreigner in Costa Rica had led her to a greater understanding of discrimination. The sentiments expressed by these students seemed to the reviewers to be developmentally appropriate and were viewed by the students themselves as evidence of the transformative nature of their experience in Costa Rica.

**Commendations:** Students are encouraged to develop individually and collectively.

**Recommendation:** Consider the need to provide students with more opportunities for structured reflection.

**IFSA-Butler Response:** Again, the C&C is created to address this issue. We are pleased to see the evaluation team perceived this need as we are already preparing to formally address it.

## **HEALTH, SAFETY, AND POLICIES**

### **15. Health and Safety:**

Prior to arrival and once on site, students commented that they perceived Costa Rica in general and Heredia in particular to be “super safe.” One even confessed to an initial reluctance to pay heed to warnings about safety while others said they were “turned off” by what they first believed to be exaggerated warnings. They cited several incidents that led them to reconsider this assumption and alter their behavior. In one class discussion on the subject of domestic violence that the reviewers heard, students related to the teacher that during a group excursion they had witnessed an assault from afar. They were clearly disturbed by the incident, yet the review team later learned that it had not been communicated to the resident director. Once informed, she said she would follow up and offer students a debriefing and support. As in any other city, safety is a real issue, but students sometimes don’t take heed of warnings until they feel threatened.

During one of the presentations made by IFSA staff the review team viewed an instructional video prepared by a film studies professor of the UNA in which actual IFSA and UNA students played the roles of visiting students and locals. The purpose of the video was to inform students of certain common risks (mostly petty crime) and advise them on how to prevent falling victim and/or respond to a threatening situation. The video was extremely well done and may be even more effective because it puts actual IFSA students in the roles of witnesses and victims of crime. If possible, IFSA should consider investing resources in producing more of this sort of material which may go a long way to educating students about health and safety.

**Commendations:** The breadth and depth of health and safety information and services is astounding.

**Recommendation:** Consider ways to synthesize and deliver information more effectively.

**IFSA-Butler Response:** We are aware these videos are attractive and helpful to students. We will continue producing videos with future groups of students to help fill out our orientation themes.

IFSA-Butler’s Assistant Director for Student Safety will be in Costa Rica this semester. She will conduct an additional review of the sites health and safety protocols and resources, and will continue considering how to implement best practices across our sites, including sharing resources or ideas from one site to another.

### **16. Emergency Plans:**

The *Digital Manual* and other written materials provided to students includes information on fire safety and road safety (including stern warnings about bicycle and pedestrian circulation where there is automobile and train/tram traffic) as well as emergency preparedness and response plans for floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and other natural disasters. During our tour of the UNA campus the emergency meeting points were readily found. The *Digital Manual* and orientation sessions also offer essential information and helpful advice on protecting one's personal safety, minimizing risks and responding to crimes or emergencies. Finally, the Critical Incident Response Plan is a model of thoroughness and clarity for other international education organizations to follow.

**Commendations:** IFSA is rightly recognized as a tried and true leader in the field of education abroad with regard to safety and crisis response.

**Recommendation:** None

### **17. Policies:**

The review team has incorporated commendations and recommendations on policies and practices within the relevant section of this report (Academics, Arrival and Orientation, etc.) and has no further comment to add here.

### **Strengths and problem areas and potential areas for growth at this site**

The reviewers agree with and would like to fine-tune the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats outlined in the document provided to us by Erika (electronic copy A CR SWOT Analysis) by offering our observations:

**Strengths:** IFSA Universidad Nacional staff, homestays, university partnership, orientation program and volunteer opportunities

**Weaknesses:** persistent issues with academic advising and course selection and registration, delay in posting program dates and course availability, lack of emphasis on particular areas of academic strength

**Opportunities:** favorable conditions to develop formal academic credit-bearing internship program, clear and distinctive academic tracks, and potential of making independent research available to qualified students

**Threats:** real or perceived threat of mental health needs of students, inertia or inaction (that is, if IFSA does not take advantage of opportunities listed above) may lead IFSA to lose its stronghold as the education abroad leader at this site

**IFSA-Butler Response:** Our new concentrations (environmental studies and teacher education) will help us emphasize these academic strengths of UNA and the program in general. We will continue to work with UNA to improve that listed under weaknesses and threats.

### Observations and/or recommendations not captured elsewhere

In our conversations with current students we took note of the reasons they gave for having selected the UNA program, and think IFSA should consider this carefully. Their reasons included:

- IFSA Costa Rica UNA was cheaper than other programs in Latin America
- The host families have great reputations on sending school campuses
- The Costa Rican accent is deemed “neutral” and seems easier to understand and acquire than accents of other Spanish-speaking countries
- Costa Rica seemed safer than other Latin American countries
- Heredia is not a big city

The review team found this list revealing by virtue of what it lacked: an essential reason to choose IFSA Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica. In other words, at least in our interactions with students, they were unable to articulate what IFSA Universidad Nacional specifically offered them and instead seemed to select it through a process of elimination based on what it does not represent (i.e. their notion of high crime, cost, and cultural barriers). These assumptions are likely shared by other Americans, including prospective students. IFSA should make an effort to convey more explicitly what UNA, Heredia, and Costa Rica feature that is unique and distinctive so that students will choose it for those compelling reasons. An important positive counterpoint is found in the perception among current students of how the IFSA UNA program differed from the other US programs with which they had become familiar in Heredia: the IFSA group views itself as decidedly more serious. One student summed it up by saying, “We’re here to learn. Others party a lot more.”

**IFSA-Butler Response:** This is an important observation. We take this seriously; in addition to the new academic emphases, we continue to think about how we may approach this from a marketing standpoint as well as program development.

### Acknowledgments

The reviewers wish to express our heartfelt thanks and gratitude to Erika Ryser-García, Teresita Camacho Viquez and Tracy Quirós Rivera for providing us with exhaustive information and materials, capably arranging and handling a busy schedule while attending to their regular professional and personal responsibilities, and maintaining a high level of energy and positive attitude throughout this process. We understand and appreciate the amount of time and effort they invested in preparing this review and hope that our recognition of the excellence of their work is evident in this report. We also wish to thank the faculty and administrators from UNA and the spring semester IFSA Universidad Nacional participants for sharing their valuable time and perspectives with us. We were especially pleased to meet and be welcomed by IFSA President and CEO Mark Scheid and various IFSA staff family members who were gracious enough to join us on several occasions. External reviews are a demanding affair for all parties involved, but the delight of sharing ideas with inspirational educational leaders such as those at IFSA is a reward not to be underestimated. Our hope is that this report and IFSA’s ongoing endeavors to improve its programs and services will continue to shape US students into positive

contributors to an ever-changing global society while encouraging strong partnerships with foreign hosts that are mutually beneficial.

July 3, 2013

**IFSA-Butler Costa Rica Message:** When we knew we were going to be evaluated we did not know how intense that was going to be and what to expect. When we meet the evaluators and they asked us what our weaknesses as a program were, it took us a while to think about it and realize the importance of this question. Then we noticed that we often think we are making advances and try to get better, but there are still many aspects to work on.

This is the first time that we have been evaluated, and it was a really worthwhile experience. This awakened the awareness of how we are dealing with work every day and the outcomes of it. There were many things that we were thinking we were doing fine, and it came out that the results were not as expected and we need another approach. Therefore, this has been a great opportunity to stop, analyze, and work hard on what is weak and improve what is good.

The advice of the evaluators immediately prompted us to start making some changes: work on the handbook, create two new newsletters from Costa Rica (Academic Affairs and Volunteer Work), start thinking about new strategies for registration procedures, compact data and improve orientation lectures, and others.

We want to thank our incredible evaluators, Melissa and Kent, because of their dedication to collecting, managing, assessing, synthesizing and analyzing data, information and experiences. They were able to search and inspect every corner, even the innermost, without making us feel uncomfortable, and they were always interested and open to talking about anything. They did an incredible job summing up everything and came out with a beautiful, objective evaluation. All this exhaustive and detailed work shall be used as an input to identify priorities and to outline and strengthen our program. In addition to this, the charismatic personalities of Melissa and Kent, and their leadership and interest, made this a great and motivating experience for us.

Finally, we want to thank Erika and Mark for joining us in this process; for representing us as our leaders and backing us up; and for meeting with the UNA administrative staff and supporting us in every step. Your presence definitely made us feel safe and an important part of the IFSA-Butler community.

## AGENDA - COSTA RICA EVALUATION

Monday, May 13, 2013

Time	Activity	People
9:00am-10:00am	Meeting in IFSA-Butler Office Presentation of the IFSA-Butler Costa Rica Program	<b>Melissa Hardin</b> , Assistant Dean International Studies/Assistant Professor Spanish (vis.), Ursinus College <b>Kent Yager</b> , Associate Professor Spanish/Chair, Spanish Department, Gettysburg College <b>Erika Ryser García</b> , Director of Latin American Programs, IFSA-Butler <b>Mark Scheid</b> , President, IFSA-Butler <b>Teresita Camacho Viquez</b> , Resident Director, IFSA-Butler Costa Rica <b>Tracy Quirós Rivera</b> , Asst. Director, IFSA-Butler Costa Rica
10:00am – 11:00am	Observation: Social History of Costa Rica, Program Class	Kent, Mark
	Visit to volunteer site – the Chamber of Commerce	Melissa
11:00am-12:00pm	Tour of Universidad Nacional (UNA)	Melissa, Kent, Mark, Tracy
12:30pm - 1:30pm	Lunch at Restaurante Pórtico	Melissa, Kent, Erika, Mark, Teresita <b>Sandra León Coto</b> , Rector, UNA <b>Francisco González Alvarado</b> , Academic Vice Rector, UNA <b>Nelly Obando Alvarez</b> , Vice Rector of Student Life, UNA <b>Mayela Avendaño Salas</b> , Director, Student Well-being, UNA
1:30pm - 2:30pm	Visit to volunteer site – Kinder Cleto. IFSA student assignment: art expression classes	Melissa, Kent, Tracy
3:00pm-4:00pm	Visit to host family	Kent, Melissa, Erika, Tracy
4:00pm - 5:00pm	Meeting with Student Life, UNA	Kent, Melissa, Tracy <b>M. Paula Vargas Segnini</b> , Coordinator, Student Life <b>Mayra Villalobos González</b> , Coordinator, Host Families, Exchange program <b>María Isabel Hidalgo</b> , Coordinator, Host Families, Exchange program <b>Vargas José Molina Rivera</b> , Academic Coordinator, Exchange program
6:00pm	Dinner at Restaurante Matices	Melissa, Kent <b>Álvaro Morales Calderón</b> , Coordinator, Hispanic Studies <b>Pamela Bolaños Alvarado</b> , Professor, Spanish Program Class <b>Edgar Antonio Chaves</b> , Professor, Spanish Program Class <b>Carlos Naranjo Gutiérrez</b> , Professor, Social History of Costa Rica, Program Class <b>Francisco San Lee</b> , Professor, Ecological Richness of Costa Rica, Program Class

**Tuesday, May 14, 2013**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>People</b>
9:00am-10:00am	Observation: First Spanish Class	Melissa, Kent
10:00am-11:00am	Observation: Second Spanish Class	Kent
	Visit Second Host Family	Melissa
11:00am-12:00pm	Meeting with <b>Mauren González Jones</b> , Spanish Tutor	Melissa, Kent
12:00pm-1:00pm	Lunch	Melissa, Kent, Teresita, Tracy
1:00pm-3:30pm	Observation: Ecological Richness of Costa Rica, Program Class	Kent
	Observation: Geoecología, UNA Class	Melissa
6:30pm	Dinner at Restaurante Castillo	Melissa, Kent, Erika Teresita, Tracy

**Wednesday, May 15, 2013**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>People</b>
9:00am-11:00am	Meeting: IFSA Housing, Health, Security, Emergency Plans	Melissa, Kent, Erika Teresita, Tracy
	Observation: Linguistics, UNA Class	Kent
11:00am-12:00pm	Tour of Heredia	Melissa, Erika, Tracy
12:00pm-1:30pm	Lunch at Trigo Miel	Melissa, Kent, Estudiantes
2:00pm-3:00pm	Meeting: IFSA wrap-up, final questions, initial feedback	Melissa, Kent, Erika Teresita, Tracy