

The Princeton University Bridge Year Program

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During the spring semester of 2008, a working group of faculty, students, and staff, chaired by Professor of Comparative Literature Sandra Bermann, studied the possibility of creating at Princeton University a new program for incoming undergraduates that would provide them with a pre-collegiate enrichment year (often called a “gap year” or, more aptly, a “bridge year”) before they matriculated at Princeton. The tuition-free year would be open to students who have accepted an offer of admission to Princeton and who wish to spend a year in public service abroad prior to beginning their freshman year.

The working group strongly endorsed the idea in its June report and recommended that the University launch the program with a pilot of approximately 20 members of the Class of 2013, beginning in the fall of 2009. The group proposed that the University collaborate with three or four established partner organizations with proven records of safety and success in running international programs for young people. These organizations would identify appropriate service positions for students, arrange home-stays, and supply logistical support to them when they are abroad. The goal is to provide students with what the working group called “humble service” in governmental and non-profit organizations, in circumstances that would give them an opportunity to become fully immersed in the language and culture of another country. To ensure that all students have an opportunity to participate in the bridge year program, the University would underwrite the majority of the costs of the program and apply need-based financial aid to the incidental costs that families will be asked to pay.

Provost Christopher Eisgruber, Dean of the College Nancy Malkiel, and I are deeply grateful to Professor Bermann and the other members of the working group for their careful study of the proposal over a very short period of time. Their exhaustive investigation of these issues, and their strong endorsement of the program, have given us the confidence we need to begin a pilot program in the fall of 2009. To quote from the working group’s conclusion:

“The Princeton International Bridge Year will offer a truly innovative approach to university learning, one that is more experiential and, we expect, more profoundly transformational, than anything our entering students will have encountered in their high school years. We purposely use the word ‘Bridge’ as opposed to ‘Gap’ year in order to underscore the value added during this year, rather than its quality as an educational break or vacuum. This Princeton sponsored—funded and organized—nine-month program will take place in a safe but unfamiliar cultural context abroad that, by its very difference from previous settings, should challenge assumptions, encourage innovative thinking,

and foster maturity. It will also provide a time of service, an opportunity for students to think about working with and for others, rather than simply with and for an 'I,' the psychological orientation characteristic of today's intensely competitive pre-college experience. "

Rationale for the Bridge Year Program

The bridge year program brings together three seemingly unrelated goals: increase the number of students who study abroad during their Princeton career; refresh the spirits of students who emerge from intensely competitive high school environments; and have our students embrace the meaning of our informal motto, "Princeton in the nation's service and the service of all nations." By spending a year before matriculation living in a different culture and working on behalf of others, bridge year participants will develop an international perspective and a commitment to public service that will inform their four years at Princeton. With its emphasis on work experience rather than study, the program will give students a respite from the pressure to excel and achieve academically that now dominates the lives of successful high school students.

A successful bridge year program will bring with it other, collateral benefits. For example, Princeton will gain a cadre of relatively experienced and mature freshmen who will add special perspectives to campus life. The program will identify Princeton as a university that is welcoming of students who care about public service in an international context. Finally, we hope that Princeton's program will provide benefit to the communities and organizations that our students serve.

The public response to this idea has been overwhelmingly positive. Well before the working group's report was issued, the national media, including the *New York Times* and NBC's "Today" show, had featured articles and segments about the program. The reaction among alumni and educators has also been very positive, and the word has spread around the globe that Princeton is once again leading with innovative ways to educate its students.

The Structure of the Bridge Year Program

The working group recommended that a pilot of the bridge year begin with approximately 20 members of the Class of 2013 in the fall of 2009, and that we aim for a steady state of approximately 100 participants in the future. The group made a number of more specific proposals about how to address operational issues related to the program. I have accepted its recommendations about these issues:

Admission to the Program. Students will be invited to apply for the program after they have accepted Princeton's offer of admission. They will be asked to complete an additional application for the program, in which they tell us the reasons why they are interested in devoting a year to international service. We will also conduct interviews, either in person or by telephone, and ask for additional letters of recommendation from individuals who can specifically address their suitability for the program. The selection process will occur during the month of May, with

students informed that they have been accepted into the program by June 1. The selection committee will be looking for openness, flexibility, courage, resourcefulness, sense of humor, eagerness to be challenged, willingness to be placed outside their comfort zone, and a commitment to service abroad. Our goal will be to select a wide range of students from the U.S. and abroad, representing a broad cross-section of backgrounds and socio-economic circumstances.

Scope of Service Opportunities. The working group proposed that for U.S. and Canadian students, "international" should mean a country outside North America; for international students, it should mean working outside their home countries. Service would be performed abroad not because countries outside the U.S. and Canada are by nature more needy, or because service there is intrinsically more worthwhile (both clearly untrue), but because experience gained abroad would heighten our students' international awareness, an important Princeton priority, and an essential ingredient for citizens of the 21st century. Later on, after the pilot phase, we could well imagine sponsoring a service program in the United States for international students. The working group proposed that participants should engage in work that is appropriate to their age and experience, and occupy jobs that could not be held by local workers. The work is intended to be "humble service" in hospitals and clinics, schools and orphanages, and grass roots organizations that are contributing to the environmental, economic, or social development of the country. While the program specifically prohibits study that would lead to university credits, language acquisition will be strongly encouraged and provided as part of the program.

Residential Arrangements. The working group also recommended that students live with carefully identified families in the host country. This would provide the greatest likelihood that students will fully immerse themselves in the language and culture of the country, while providing them with a supportive environment. They recommended, too, that small clusters of three to seven students be placed in each community, so that there will be opportunities for students to support one another and to share their experiences.

Partner Organizations. To identify suitable service positions for bridge year participants, the University will collaborate with partner organizations that have extensive in-country experience placing 18- to 25-year-olds. The University is soliciting proposals from potential organizations, which will also be asked to provide logistical support in the host countries, including housing assignments with families, visas, in-country orientation, regular check-ins, emergency services, and opportunities for language training.

From the research conducted by the working group, it is clear that there is no single organization that has a program precisely like the one we intend. In seeking partners for the bridge year program, we are therefore asking organizations to adapt their own programs to one that can accommodate 18- to 19-year-olds in a program of nine months' duration.

Schedule. The bridge year program will run on a schedule that parallels the academic year. It will begin with an orientation program on the Princeton campus, which will introduce students to the details of the program, inform them of their responsibilities and obligations before departure, and create a sense of community among the participants. Once in-country, the partner organization will be responsible for further country-specific orientation to introduce students to the language, history, and culture of the country, and prepare them for their roles as volunteers.

Connections to Princeton. It is important that the bridge year students have a sense of connectedness with Princeton during their year abroad. Through such mechanisms as a website, Facebook pages, blogs, and visits from bridge year staff, it is hoped that there will be regular communications among the participants and students and staff on campus. We also anticipate that through articles in the *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, the *Princeton Weekly Bulletin*, and the *Daily Princetonian*, the campus will be kept abreast of the students' activities. The University will also stay in touch with the parents of the participants and will encourage alumni in the host country to meet the students.

The program will end in late spring, and participants will be invited back to campus in late August, immediately prior to freshman orientation, to compare experiences and to advise administrators of the bridge year program how to improve the program in future years. We also hope that graduates of the bridge year program will be advocates for the program, and for study abroad, to their classmates and prospective students.

Administrative Issues. The working group identified a series of administrative issues, including those that address the critical areas of safety and liability, which will need to be ironed out before the program is finally launched. These include providing accurate region-specific health and safety information to participants; monitoring regularly the local political situation to assess risk to participants and having exit strategies planned in advance; determining whether participants will have "student" status that would provide them with access to loans and the student health insurance plan; and identifying the areas of legal liability that the University might face.

Funding the Bridge Year Program

One critical issue for students and their families will be cost. Princeton will cover the majority of the costs of this program and will provide financial aid based on need for those families who cannot afford the incidental costs that families will be asked to pay. We are committed to making this program available to any admitted student, regardless of family financial circumstances. I have been deeply grateful to the Princeton alumni who have generously directed their gifts to this nascent program.

Staffing the Bridge Year Program

The working group recommends, and we agree, that the start-up phase of the bridge year program will require at least three administrators: a director, an administrative assistant, and a staff member with international experience who would keep in touch with the participants and visit them several times in-country. The director will report to Dean of the College Nancy Malkiel. A search is underway to identify the inaugural director.

Publicizing the Bridge Year Program

With a very short period of time with which to launch the program, it is critical that information about the opportunity be assembled expeditiously. Dean Malkiel has commissioned the development of a website, to be linked to the admission website, and a variety of electronic and print materials will be created for prospective students and applicants, as well as guidance counselors and principals. Our Alumni Schools Committee interviewers need to be informed about the program, and admission officers need to be ready for questions as they travel.

Working Group Membership

Sandra Bermann, Professor and Chair of Comparative Literature and Chair of the Working Group

Kofi Agawu, Professor of Music

Alison Boden, Dean of Religious Life and the Chapel

Karolina Brook '10

Diana Davies, Associate Provost for International Initiatives

Dimitris Gondicas, Executive Director of the Program in Hellenic Studies

Gene Grossman, Jacob Viner Professor of International Economics

Laurel Harvey, General Manager for Safety and Administration

Colton Heward-Mills '10

Nancy Kanach, Associate Dean of the College

Clarence Rowley, Associate Professor of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering

Sankar Suryanarayan, University Counsel

Anastasia Vrachnos, Executive Director of Princeton in Asia

Deborah Yashar, Professor of Politics