

Cultural Competence in Public Administration: My Experience in Tobago

“Another sunny day, 85 degrees, with a chance of afternoon showers....”

Every day during the month of October on the lovely island of Tobago, the weather report reads exactly the same—lots of sun, very humid, and a chance of rain in the afternoon. However, my purpose in Tobago was not to enjoy the weather, but to work as a research assistant for the Delaware Academy for School Leadership (DASL). Since 2008, DASL has had the pleasure and honor of providing professional-development education and services for administrators and teachers on the island of Tobago. The initiative has morphed from a single two-week training into an ongoing year-round project that involves several staff members and attracts more than 100 participants. I have learned so much working on this project, but I think the most important lesson was the role of cultural competence in collaborative international public administration programs.

Cultural competency is the ability to work effectively with people from different cultures. Culture is a learned way of acting, thinking and feeling. Public administrators working on international projects must recognize that differences in culture require differences in program delivery. The culture of the education system in Tobago is quite different than that in Delaware. Government schools, which are the equivalent of our public schools, have a deep integration with religion, which is something that is unseen in the United States. Teachers and administrators are required to retire from the profession at the age of 60, regardless of their ability to work. Although Trinidad and Tobago have been an independent nation since 1962, there are lasting remnants of the British education system, particularly the methods of instruction employed by schools.

DASL is attempting to support a sea change in education on the island of Tobago. By teaching educators and other school leaders the importance of student engagement, time management, and professional learning communities, we are hoping to increase the academic prowess of one of the lowest performing school districts in the nation of Trinidad and Tobago. Utilizing evidence-based strategies, DASL staff and partners train teachers and administrators to not only use these strategies in their own classrooms and buildings but to embark on a journey in collaboration with all schools on the island to become a school district known for academic excellence.

DASL has a long-term goal of improving student achievement on the island. Achieving that goal requires cultural competence for DASL and its partners. This program requires and investment of time as well as human and financial resources to ensure the cultural competency needed for those responsible for DASL achieving its goal. Building the cultural competency bridge is not an easy task. In order to increase my cultural competence DASL allowed me to begin working this project in 2008 by researching education practices in the West Indies, reading reports on experiences by staffers who traveled to the island, and managing communications between our office in Delaware and our cohort in Tobago. As a research assistant, I created and developed *News & Tools You Can Use*, a monthly newsletter for our participants in Tobago that addresses issues pertaining to improving the delivery of instruction in primary and secondary schools.

DASL’s investment in ensuring my cultural competence proved to be a tremendous asset during their fourth trip to the island in the fall of 2009. Through understanding the history of the island and the status of education on the island, I was able to work with the DASL staff to develop training that was relevant and engaging for participants. Coupling my research with the actual island experience was an invaluable lesson in understanding cultural competency in public administration. My research assistantship provided me the field experience I needed to make a simple topic in my academic curriculum relevant to my future as a public administrator.

—by Monique Liston