

For the Future of Florida

A Proposal for A Study Abroad Program for Canadian College Students

by **Geoffrey Clarfield** (October 2014)

Preface-Why Study the Future of Florida?

There are numerous studies that show that young American and Canadian students have a diminishing understanding of geography. They often do not know the names of the state capitals of the United States or Europe or (in the States) think that Toronto is the capital of Canada. And so, when I read these kinds of reports I often scan the Internet for the kinds of courses that could remedy this lack of important knowledge.

I also scan the "Study Abroad" listings that are now one of the biggest "draws" when parents and their children are deciding which college or university to send their children to. Since the younger generation is hooked on the future, (Apple computers, Ted talks etc.) but largely ignorant of the past, I have designed this program so that by focusing on the future, and experiencing the present, young college students would begin to understand the power of the past. And since I love tropical and semi tropical places, I have written this course outline for Florida, a place I have visited many times. I certainly hope that the state of Florida will last and that its past waters will not define its future status!

Introduction-The Future of Florida

A mere 20,000 years ago, the territory that is now Florida was almost twice its present size. Then, as the climate changed, with the Holocene well under way, the waters rose and Florida's coastline assumed its now familiar shape. It made very little difference to Florida's prehistoric inhabitants, for they then numbered in the thousands.

One hundred years ago the population of Florida stood at less than one million people. It is now the fourth most populous state in the Union, at just under 20 million inhabitants. In 2011 it received over 80 million tourists and if planners have their way, that would rise to 100 million annually. Half a million Canadians own homes in Florida and it is estimated that at any one time, 3 million Canadians (10% of the total population of Canada) are resident in the state.

For more than five hundred years Florida has been consistently sold to newcomers as a "paradise" waiting for the new immigrant to thrive. For centuries flamboyant men and women

have sold Florida as a place to build the future, whether it is that of the Spanish or British Empires or Confederate America. NASA and the Walt Disney Corporation have more recently marketed their own alternative future scenarios there. This is because the story of Florida is a story of dramatic boom and bust, led by remarkable non-conformists such as the late railway magnate Henry Flagler, Walt Disney himself or, the more bohemian writer, Ernest Hemingway, a former employee of the Toronto Star.

Florida looms large in the Canadian imagination. It is home to Disney World and Miami Beach, two places which conjure up films like Fantasia, A Hundred and One Dalmatians or Godfather II, Scarface and of course, Miami Vice. But Florida is both more than and less than most Canadians perceive. It is a state with no mineral resources. Its manufacturing base is minimal and its agricultural base is in decline. Tourism is the largest sector of its economy. Florida also has the lowest taxes in the country and one of the worst public school systems in the United States.

It is plagued by titanic hurricanes, infestations of frogs and a recent invasion of deadly, imported Burmese pythons that are transforming the ecology of its Everglades National Park. It was also the most Confederate of Confederate states, a bastion of white supremacy until the mid 1960s and, its official historiography is still plagued with "neo Confederate" apologists. Having first been colonized by Spanish speakers, if present trends continue, Spanish speakers may once again become the majority in the State.

Florida is a magnet for immigrants from the Caribbean and Latin America. It is also home to more than one hundred ethnic groups from every part of the world in addition to its historically "indigenous" Anglos, Hispanics and African Americans. It is the place where the elderly retire, where the drug trade thrives (the latest "pirates" of the Caribbean), and where the hip and the beautiful congregate on Miami Beach. One utopian version of its future can be explored at Disney's Epcot Center, while a more modest version can be observed in the geriatric enclaves of "planned communities," whose residents give up their municipal rights in order to live in gated compounds. It goes without saying that its slums are "no go" areas for tourists and the middle classes.

Florida is one living scenario of the future, for better or for worse. But its coming "bust" may come from its latest and main attraction, the sea. Florida scientists now fear that if the oceans become warmer, sea levels may rise and within a century, southern Florida would be under water. If that comes to pass, then Miami and its suburbs would disappear under the waves. Its millions of well-heeled inhabitants may then flee northwards. Many of them may end up in Canada. This is just one of many reasons that justifies an informed and experiential

study of its future.

Future Studies, Forecasting and Experiential Learning

This study abroad program is designed to introduce Canadian undergraduates to the concept of "area studies," and "future studies" two topics that are important for the future of tourism. In this case the study of Florida and its future, would include its present as well as the past, which informs it. It is particularly designed for college students who major in hospitality and tourism, allowing them to study the particulars of an area in order to gain a "holistic" understanding of its future problems and prospects, as Florida has become one of the world's leading tourist destination.

It is also designed for writers of all kinds, such as journalism and creative writing students who want to widen their horizons through this kind of experiential learning.

Any student majoring in Canadian studies could use this course to compare the US experience to that of its northern neighbour. Finally, it could be taken by any student in environmental studies or urban planning or, for those few interdisciplinary students who have made the growing field of forecasting and futurology studies the focus of their majors.

If an institution of higher education adopted this course the course would take place over a one-semester period of ten weeks in various places in Florida. Each week would include up to five daily site visits, a daily lecture, one Florida based documentary or dramatic film, one academic article and one newspaper/magazine article, each related to the daily topic of study. These would be supported by one daily lecture by a local expert. These consist of two kinds, one academic, and one practical delivered by Floridians who work in a particular sector of the economy, whether it be public utilities or the entertainment business.

On the Saturday of each study week there would be a multiple-choice test to insure that students have absorbed the facts and concepts introduced during the week. These cumulative tests would comprise 50% of course work. A research essay at the end of the course would comprise the other 50%. Of course attendance at all lectures, films and site visits is mandatory.

Saturday evenings and Sundays would be free. The program would provide optional tours and events for students during their off days at their own cost. Otherwise, they could be assured of a day of rest at the beach or beside the hotel swimming pool.

Week One-Florida's Tropical Keys and the Coral Reef

The first week would take place in Florida's Keys, a series of semi tropical islands, which include Florida's (and the United States) only tropical coral reef, an ecological niche that is suffering from pollutant induced "coral bleaching." While travelling, swimming, snorkeling, sailing, walking and visiting various parts of the Keys, students would explore the geology and prehistory of Florida and the Keys, the geography of Florida and the Keys, biodiversity and ecology of Florida and the Keys, the historical geography of Florida and the Keys and finally, the planning of Florida's' Natural Parks; including their history, functions and future plans.

Week Two-The Future of the Everglades

The second week would be focused on the exploration of the Everglades and Florida's remaining indigenous peoples, the Seminole. Topics would include the zoning of Florida and the zoning of state parks, land use in and outside of the Everglades, the recent invasion of Burmese pythons and pollution in and outside of national parks. Sub topics would include demography, immigration, population pressure and regarding the Seminole, an exploration of the following topic: "Are casinos the solution to indigenous poverty?" The relation between indigenous peoples and the conservation of biodiversity would also be explored. The final topic would focus on planning the Everglades in the context of demographic forecasts for the next 25 years.

Week Three-Greater Miami

Week three would be dedicated to exploring and understanding the megapolis that comprises Greater Miami, including Palm Beach, Coral Gables and Fort Lauderdale. Topics would include the structure of the municipalities, including the people and its laws. Sub topics would include urban demography and ethnicity, values, religion and comparative HDI (Human Development Index). We would learn about infrastructure and services, the planning and maintenance of roads, bridges, transport, water and electricity, as well as "soft services" such as health, education and welfare (for both the rich and poor). We would focus especially on "Miami Virtue and Vice" *i.e.* the local, state and federal laws and their enforcement through Police, National Guard and Federal authorities.

As Miami is the creative center for the region we would also visit its major newspapers, radios and TV stations as well as learn about the local structure of the Internet and the educational system. Finally, we would meet the planners of greater Miami and hear about their scenarios and forecasts for Greater Miami's future. As much of Miami is about nightlife, we would organize structured visits to cinemas, theater, music, art galleries, clubs and clubbing

(with a rather strict safety and communication code that would apply to all students at all times, as Miami has its dangers as well as its joys).

Week Four –The Gold and Treasure Coast, “The Presence of the Past”

The northeast coast above Miami is often known as the gold and treasure coasts as so many Spanish galleons, loaded with New World Gold sunk in its waters. These sunken ships are the continuous and controversial objects of treasure hunters who are constantly romanticized in the press. Archaeologists want nothing to do with them, for they feel they destroy precious historical sites that need proper excavation. However, the State of Florida does not have the money to support this work as there is no income tax in the State. And so, on this one issue of contemporary tourism it is necessary to get a quick understanding of Florida’s contested history.

Across five days we would explore the seven periods of Florida history, its indigenous period, rule by Spain, England and the USA, Confederate America, reconstruction, and the post WWII transformation brought about by the civil rights movement. Finally, we would examine the history of Florida’s latest, recent demographic boom.

Some of the sub topics during this week would include, the deceptively genteel lives of Florida’s elderly, the history of violence against Florida’s indigenous peoples and African Americans, the legacy of the Spanish, the era of the pirates and its present day manifestations in the drug trade, the French past and British heritage and the disputed Americanization of Florida. One special focus could be multi-culturalism or, the future of the aged in Florida.

Week Five-Orlando and the Space Coast; American Dream or Fantasy?

Over hundred years ago French author Jules Verne predicted that Americans would send a rocket to space from a place on the coast of eastern Florida. Today, the east coast of Florida and the hinterland of central Florida (the area in and around Orlando) are home to the most dynamic and flamboyant efforts to provide a window to the future for the common citizen. At Cape Canaveral one finds one of the centers of the American space effort. There one visits real launch pads from where real scientists and astronauts once put humans on the moon.

In dramatic contrast, a few kilometers inland is the world created and run by the Disney Corporation, a world of fantasy, future cities, infotainment and entertainment that receives the bulk of Florida’s tourists. The fantasy factor is amplified by the nearby presence of Universal Studios. Topics during this week would include, science, technology and society, the

study of forecasting the future, Yankee ingenuity and the future of innovation, the race for space; past, present and future, conservation, biodiversity, zoos and animal rights. The final day would explore the corporate structure of the Disney Corporation or Universal Studios and their forward planning.

Week Six-The Gulf Coast

The beginning of week six would mark the beginning of the second half of the term. By this point students would have read twenty five popular articles, 25 academic articles, seen 25 documentaries and films and received 25 lectures as well as well as gone on numerous site visits. During this week they would need time to absorb and review what they have learnt so far and finalize the topic for their final essay with staff.

This part of the course would be based on the west coast, on the Gulf of Mexico and would include visits to sites in and around Sarasota, Tampa and St. Petersburg. Given that much of the tourism here is water based, this week would focus on water, reviewing and upgrading students water based skills. Lectures and hands on work shops would be given on first aid, swimming and life saving, safe windsurfing, sailing and fishing. It would also include a day with the coastguard and a day studying the future of tourism statewide.

Week Seven – Central Florida and The Interior Lakes

Inland Florida is a land of farms and cattle ranches. Therefore, this week would consist of residence and visits to farms and ranches in order to study the food production system of the state, what is local and what is imported. Topics would include how to run a ranch, how to run a farm, nutrition wars and sustainable agriculture, hunting and its future as well as exploring the variety of institutions that keep food production in state-banks, cooperatives, regulators etc. Expertise would be drawn from the private sector, government as well as colleges of agriculture and livestock.

Week Eight-The Northeast-College Town of St Augustine

Flagler College is a classic private American college located in the coastal town of St. Augustine. During this week we would use both the premises and staff of Flagler College to better understand all and every aspect that goes into running a college such as this one, duly noting the similarities and differences with those of Canada and Ontario. At the same time, it would allow students to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the Florida education system and how it does and does not serve the state and its visitors. The program would try and find ways and means whereby our students can meet Flagler students both formally and

informally, to better understand our southern neighbours.

Week Nine – Tallahassee and the Politics of Statehood

Tallahassee and not Miami is the state capital of Florida and unlike Canada, whenever there is jurisdictional doubt, the American constitution favours the right of the state over the federal government. And so the past, present and future of state's rights is a fitting topic for week nine. Topics would focus on the present and future roles and functions of the components of the Florida state government.

These include (but are not limited to) the Office of the Governor, the Office of the Lieutenant Governor, the Office of the State Attorney General, the Agricultural, Arts and Civil Service departments as well as the Consumer Protection Council, Banking and Financial regulators and offices dedicated to Economic Development, Education, Emergency Management, Housing, Insurance, Justice, Labor, Law, the State Lottery and the Licensing of Motor Vehicles.

There are also departments of Energy, Environment, Fire Protection, Health Care, Highway Patrol, Military Affairs, the National Guard, the Adjutant General's Office, Occupational Safety and Health, Public Pensions, State Parks, the State University System, Transportation, Unemployment Insurance, Veteran's Affairs and Worker's Compensation. Site visits would include places both inside and outside of the city limits that are relevant to the jurisdictions of the above-mentioned authorities and based on their representatives' suggestions.

Week Ten The Panhandle-Northern Florida is the Deep South

As it is commonly understood, the Florida Panhandle was once part of Plantation America and it is still considered part of the Deep South. It has a number of interesting sites and a riverine park where one can canoe for one to three days, plus beautiful beaches and museums. As this would be the last week of the trip, the course would examine Florida's southern heritage on half-day site visits, while allowing students to work on their essays in the afternoons and evenings.

Some of the topics that may be explored include, the "mind" of the south, the history of the south, art and music from a southern perspective, is there a new south and, will the south disappear? Logistically, it may be best to establish a beachside location for this week and day trips would go out from the site. Bearing this in mind one must never forget that Country Singer Jimmy Buffet is a Florida native.

Well then, you can stop imagining what this course might do to a young impressionable mind. But my dearest hope is that bathed in the present and challenged by the future, this kind of course could motivate more than a few students to study the past of their own country, state or province of origin. Our future, and theirs, depends upon it. Any takers?

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