THE IMPACT
OF HERITAGE GREECE

RESEARCH FROM THE AMERICAN COLLEGE OF GREECE
ON BEHALF OF THE NATIONAL HELLENIC SOCIETY

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ATHENS | GREECE
ABOUT THE AMERICAN COLLEGE OF GREECE

Located in Athens, Greece since 1923, The American College of Greece was founded in 1875 in Smyrna (today, Izmir, Turkey). The College is the oldest and largest American-accredited (New England Association of Schools and Colleges) institution of higher learning in Europe offering undergraduate degree validation from The Open University of the United Kingdom. Recognized in the United States as a non-profit, 501 (c) 3, organization and in Greece as a Center of Post-Lyceum Education, the College offers undergraduate programs in liberal arts and sciences, business, and fine and performing arts; graduate programs in the arts and sciences as well as graduate business programs at ALBA Graduate Business School at The American College of Greece. With a diverse and growing international student body and accomplished faculty, ACG remains committed to its historic mission of the finest of US academic standards in the heart of classical Greece.

ABOUT THE NATIONAL HELLENIC SOCIETY

The National Hellenic Society celebrates Hellenic heritage by sponsoring and organizing programs and activities that promote and preserve the values and ideals of our Hellenic culture thereby enriching our community and nation. Established by a group of dedicated Greek Americans each a leader in their respective fields, the members of The National Hellenic Society have demonstrated the values and ideals that the National Hellenic Society espouses: service to our fellow citizens, the communities we live in and our nation. The National Hellenic Society's purpose and interest is the perpetuation of those values and ideals that are embodied within the Hellenic heritage--classical ideas associated with ancient Greek democracy including the pursuit of knowledge, education, the arts and civic responsibility. The National Hellenic Society has been incorporated under the laws of the state of Delaware as a non-profit, non-stock, tax-exempt entity under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Through the support of programs that foster the preservation of the Hellenic heritage in the United States, The National Hellenic Society strives to be a beacon for the promotion, understanding and appreciation of the Hellenic heritage in the United States, and pass on the stewardship of Greek heritage and shared democratic values and ideals to the next generation.
GREECE AND THE ODYSSEUS GENE

For millennia, Greeks have been a people of the Diaspora. Concepts like Xeniteia, or sojourning through foreign lands, and patrida, or homeland, arouse a whole array of powerful emotions in the hearts of Greek expatriates. The poet George Seferis, a son of Smyrna, was obsessed with the meaning of these concepts. Known by some, worth knowing by all is his epic poem *Mythistorema*, which closes with this timeless and evocative chorus:

A little farther
we will see the almond trees blossoming
the marble gleaming in the sun
the sea breaking into waves
a little farther,
let us rise a little higher.

Here end the works of the sea, the works of love.
Those who will someday live here where we end —
should the blood happen to darken in their memory and overflow —
let them not forget us, the weak souls among the asphodels,
let them turn the heads of the victims towards Erebus:

We who had nothing will school them in serenity.

Seferis was the first Greek to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, in 1963. In the conclusion to his acceptance speech, he summed up his humanist philosophy thus: “When on his way to Thebes, Oedipus encountered the Sphinx, his answer to its riddle was: ‘Man.’ That simple word destroyed the monster. We have many monsters to destroy. Let us think of the answer of Oedipus.”

This combined sense and sensibility have long inspired Greeks in every corner of the Diaspora, fueling the imagination, giving rise to cultural distinctions and forging concrete connections to Greek history and one’s sense of being Greek. Diaspora Greeks come away from visits to the homeland deeply moved by the beauty of the haunting landscape, the hue and layers of Aegean blue, the symbolism of myths and legends, heroes and kings who on ancient soil and sea nurtured Hellenistic ideals through an understanding of historic, spiritual and contemporary Greece’s relevancy in society and the world.

This is the founding mission of the Heritage Greece Program, an ambitious birthright Greece program rooted in a simple premise: That enabling visits to the homeland can actually make Greeks more Greek.
What exactly is “being” Greek? What is a Greek-American? While a very broad question to be sure, the Heritage Greece Program focuses specifically on the hyphenated identity of first, second and third generation young Greek-Americans, because as research confirms, the greatest loss of language, culture and religious identity exists between these two generations. “The pressure from American society to conform makes Greeks of (this next) generation more vulnerable to losing their ethnic identity.” (Kourvetaris)

By concentrating on giving young adult Diaspora Greeks the gift of a two-week educational trip to Greece with their peers, the hope is that young Greeks will become more engaged with their tradition. But can a brief visit to Greece have a lasting effect on Greek identity?

THE JOURNEY

Drawing from an expansive body of research and scholarship on the complexities of how Greek-American identity is both formed and successfully maintained throughout the inter-generational experience, Heritage Greece was launched by the National Hellenic Society in 2010 as a bold experiment to measure the impact of experiential learning on Greek identity. In its inaugural year, 15 high achieving Greek American students from across the United States embarked on an educational experiment funded entirely by the private support of a consortium of philanthropists through the National Hellenic Society. In cooperation with DEREE – The American College of Greece, the partnership was designed to include a carefully crafted itinerary balancing academic and cultural learning designed to strengthen the notion of heritage through an intensive immersion experience.

The program was expanded to 20 students in 2011 and in 2012, the program grew to include 25 students who stayed in Greece for 13 days. Greek-American participants represented all regions of the USA and a diverse background of academic studies. In addition, seven students from DEREE-ACG were selected to join and act as peer facilitators for the Greek-American students, while they also had an opportunity to examine their own ethnicity from a new perspective.

One of the defining structural characteristics of the Heritage Greece program is the combination of the Greek-American students with DEREE-ACG students. This is done to enhance the experience and to facilitate the immersion of the Greek-American students into Greek culture. A wide variety of academic areas of study were represented through the Greek American participants, including majors in Chemical Bimolecular Engineering, Classical Civilization, Economics, English, Environmental Geoscience, Greek Studies, Finance, Mathematics, Philosophy, Physics, Psychology, Statistics and Strategic Communications among other disciplines.
RESEARCH: THE MEANING OF HERITAGE TO SELF-IDENTITY

“It reinforces a new pride for my heritage that papa instilled so long ago.”

Heritage Greece Student | 2012

Heritage Greece was designed to test the proposition that providing an opportunity for young Greeks to “reclaim their birthright” and experience Greece as part of a peer group would alter their Greek engagement. As importantly, careful study of the program's impact over time was deemed critical in order to assess the program's effectiveness. As important as the experience itself, was measuring what was the most meaningful take-away of the trip for participants and what aspects of their sense of Greek identity had changed as a result of the experience.

Was the trip just a fun experience that would soon be forgotten, or did it linger in their hearts and minds and in their lives? Would participants see themselves differently? Would they become more involved in the Greek community both in Greece and the United States? Would they have a desire to return to Greece? What impact would the financial crisis and its impact on Greece have on their sense of identity? By living, traveling and studying in Greece amidst the tumultuous backdrop of the financial crisis, would they be more prone to returning with a more tangible and contemporary understanding of how they might help maintain Greek traditions in their lives after the program?

Our program of research was designed to answer these questions. As part of this research, participants took a pre-departure and exit survey, measuring student expectations and actual experiences in order to crystallize the very essence of the Heritage Greece program and to affirm its importance.

PRE-DEPARTURE EXPECTATIONS

The Greek-American students held high expectations for the program. Some of the dimensions of these expectations were addressed by five questions in the pre-arrival survey. The results are the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Score: 1 (lowest) – 5 (highest)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I expect this experience to be fun</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I expect this experience to be educational</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I see this trip as an opportunity to understand modern Greece better</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I see this trip as an opportunity to understand my ancestry better</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have encouraged other Greek friends to apply to the program</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These expectations were met as indicated by the score of the following statements included in the exit survey, which score consistently above 4.0. The statements offer a good indicator of the program's success:
EXIT SURVEY RESULTS

The overall impression of the HG program was measured in the exit survey through the first four questions. It is noticeable that the indicators of the overall evaluation yielded high average scores. A very important metric for any program is the extent to which it has a positive impact on the participants. This is measured by seven questions, the results of which are listed below:

The average scores of the specific questions were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Score: 1 (lowest) – 5 (highest)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I understand Greek culture better as a result of this program</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I better understand and appreciate my ancestry as a result of this program</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would recommend this experience to other students</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have grown closer to my Greek heritage as a result of this program</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a result of this experience, I would plan another trip to Greece</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Given the opportunity, I would take a semester of courses at DEREE-ACG</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a result of this program, I intend on exploring my ancestry further</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will consider engaging with Greek America when I return to the States</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

OPEN-ENDED COMMENTARY

I now have a more realistic vision of Greece and the roots of my heritage. I got to be in Greece during such a critical point in her history and this one in a lifetime opportunity was more than I could have ever expected. When I think of Greece now, I am going to think of my memories here, not just a vacation spot.

Allowed me to see more than just what is portrayed through the media. I see that while there is a very diverse people and scenery all of it is connected.

I could never have understood the things I achieved here or witnessed firsthand. I crystallized in myself the essence of Greece.

Greece is amazing. I have identified with this country in a way that is indescribable. Είμαι στην Ελλάδα και είμαι την Ελλάδα. I always knew.
CONCLUSIONS

The Heritage Greece Program has – in three short years – affirmed that immersion affords students the opportunity to build relationships and learning that will last a lifetime. Heritage Greece provided participants with a very positive educational experience, forging a new understanding of what it means to be Greek in a contemporary and practical sense. It afforded them a definition of what it means to be Greece through possibilities. Possibilities filtered through ancient and contemporary realities. From classroom learning, to traveling the country, visiting with government, civic, religious and business leaders, the challenge is to develop equally engaging opportunities — ones that capture the spirit of Greece and cultivate a love of Greece.

For future generations of Greek-Americans, being Greek is far more than speaking the language or quoting the lessons of the great philosophers. A deeper, more meaningful appreciation of the very meaning of Greek ideals that fuel both spirit and imagination, expressing what it means to be Greek throughout countless domains of life. Participants learned about the richness of the language, the nuances distinctive to Greek culture and heritage, that they embraced a fundamental appreciation of Greek cultural practices and traditions, learning how to perpetuate them in ways large and small.

Heritage Greece is about this reclamation process….about stoking the imaginations of the next generation of Greek-American thinkers and tinkerers, to be pragmatists and dreamers. Where the symbolism of Hellenism's endurance and renewal ultimately binds participants in the collective Odyssey of their ancestors. So that the Hellenistic ideals upon which Western civilization was founded will continue to flourish, perhaps even helping answer some of the challenges of our era but also the opportunity to design a better future.