

TEACHING

Every 2 Years, One Professor Turns the Olympics Into Her Classroom

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SILVIA IZQUIERDO, AP IMAGES

Eduardo Paes, mayor of Rio de Janeiro, carries the Olympic torch past samba dancers on its way to Friday's opening ceremony. Students from George Washington U. will be at the Games doing research on what draws spectators to attend, among other questions.

The 2016 Summer Olympics are set to begin on Friday in Rio de Janeiro, and a group of students from George Washington University will be on hand to study spectator motivation and behavior.

The students, led by Lisa Delpy Neirotti, an associate professor of sport management, will be collecting data on the use of Olympic venues, seating, and security, among other things. The students are also writing term papers on issues like hospitality, media, sponsorships, and transportation. The students' data will be used by the International Olympic Committee to improve planning in coming years.

This will be the 14th time Ms. Neirotti has taken students in her courses to either the Winter or Summer Games.

The Chronicle spoke this week with Ms. Neirotti, who is already in Rio, about how her students will be conducting their research. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Q. Where did the idea of taking students to the Olympics come from?

A. I first started going in 1984 with the Sarajevo Winter Olympic Games, as a student. I was interning for the U.S. Olympic Committee. In '84, I volunteered for the Los Angeles Olympic Games. In '88, I was still studying in my master's, and I knew how much I learned from being a student at the Olympic Games, and I wanted to offer that same experience to my students.

Q. This study with the IOC, is this something you've done with students in previous years, or is this a new thing?

A. This is a new research study that we're doing. We've always done research in the past. We're doing research as a longitudinal study that I've been doing with my students since 1992, and that's on spectators.





Lisa Delpy Neirotti: “I knew how much I learned from being a student at the Olympic Games, and I wanted to offer that same experience to my students.”

Basically, we interview people who’ve traveled 50-plus miles to be in Rio. Primarily they’re American and European people who can speak English; it’s all an English-speaking survey. We ask them questions like, What were the factors that influenced their decision to come? How long are they staying? What are they doing? How much are they spending?

It’s really a consumer motivation and behavior research. For many years, up until about four years ago, IOC did not really consider spectators as an important client. But now they have a whole department that is looking at what happens with the spectator on site.

Q. You spoke about looking at consumer motivation and behavior. What else are the students going to collect data on, and how will they go about doing it?

A. For the IOC research, we have credentials, and we’re assigned different venues. They go in and have to do all these different observations within the venue during the event.

On top of all that, we have a lecture series with everyone from IOC members, IOC staff, U.S. Olympic Committee staff, to about six sponsors, Coca-Cola, General Electric, Citibank, Nissan. We also have local city representatives and the Rio Convention & Visitors Bureau. We meet with everyone involved in the Games and hear their perspective of what they did in the lead-up, what the preparations were, how things are going, and some of the challenges.

We also meet with future organizers. We'll meet with Pyeongchang [South Korea], which is the next Olympics. In fact, the president of Pyeongchang 2018 Winter Olympic Games is a GW alum, so we're very excited about that. One of the executive-board members for the Rio 2016 Games is a GW alum. By coincidence we have these great GW alums that are in high positions in the Olympic movement.

Q. When your students are in different venues, and they're making observations, what kind of observations are they making?

A. They're in the venues looking at what percent of the seats are actually filled in blocks that we're looking at, like athlete seating and media seating. We're looking at security and how many people go through the portals at a specific time frame. We're looking at different things in the venue that will help future organizers.

Q. How did you have the students prepare for this trip?

A. We already put our hours in the classroom before we came down here. Now they're doing another 60 hours while they're down here. It's only a three-credit-hour class, but it's quite extensive.

We had lectures not only about the organization of the Olympic movement, all the terminology, the history, the sponsors, everything about the Olympics. But then we also had the training on the data-collection project.

Q. What do the final assignments look like?

A. Prior to going, they had to take an exam on everything we covered up to the Olympics, and they also had to turn in two drafts of their term paper.

Everyone has a different term-paper topic. One person is doing it on all the different national houses here. Somebody's doing it on transportation. Somebody's doing it on

media. Somebody's doing it on sponsors. Somebody's doing it on ticketing. Another person doing it on the look of the Games. Everyone has a unique topic that's important to the Games.

They do all the research about what's supposed to happen, and then here on site, they learn more about what happened. They write the final part of their paper with their personal experiences here on site and anything additional that they learned.

Q. When you were planning this trip, how did you factor in health and safety concerns?

A. I took a group of students to the World Cup a couple of years ago, and I've already been to Brazil six times in the past four years. Also in 2011, I had 28 or 27 M.B.A. students doing a consulting project for both the World Cup and Rio 2016. I'm pretty familiar with the security risks.

I always tell people that the Olympics are probably the most safe time to travel to a place because they have security everywhere. We feel pretty safe here. We just have to be a little bit more aware, and we stress that to the students every day.

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