

How to Begin a Successful Study Abroad Course

Short-term study abroad classes offer a great method to address employer priorities. As employers seek to build a comprehensive work environment and prioritize not only subject matter discipline knowledge and its relevant application, they also desire to hire students with a wider breadth of skills (NACE Staff, 2019). These skills include considerable “soft- or people-skills,” now being referred to as “career- or world-readiness skills.” Employers certainly value and assess a student’s knowledge base, but in addition successful employers want employees to demonstrate the ability to apply relevant information to assist others in solving challenges and being more productive (P. Crawford and W. Fink–APLU, 2020). Study abroad experiences provide an excellent opportunity for students to develop these skills.

In preparation for a study abroad course, just as with any course, the instructors must apply critical curriculum design components to this experience if it is to be meaningful. Careful attention must be paid to the expected learning outcomes using Bloom's Taxonomy and background design to select content, preparation needed, relevant assignments/activities and assessments. It is also critical to establish trusted on-the-ground collaborators to ensure the experiences can be planned and executed in a well-organized and intentionally educational manner.

Collectively, since 2002 the authors have led 31 short-term study abroad class trips ranging from 10 – 28 days to 10 countries. Below are a few thoughts and steps that need to be considered and addressed in order to make a group study abroad class trip a true success. The process takes time and planning should begin at least 24 months before the first student trip.

Who do you know?

These classes are not possible without partners or collaborators on the ground. Where do you have relationships on the ground that can make your desired experience possible and safe? This can be other attendees at professional conferences, university graduates, friends, or colleagues at your university or industry leaders.

The course leadership team should take an exploration trip and join your in-country colleagues, Follow the exact route and lodging, meals, etc. that you intend to take with your students. What resources are available on site? Building relationships is key!

What expertise do you need: hosts/local resource people? Language, culture, research, experiential projects, technical skills, people skills, knowledge?

Where to Begin?

Start as you would for any class. Define the expected learning outcomes and write the syllabus and create the assignments and what assessments will be used for to assess learning/transformational changes.

Determine what other teacher, faculty, or staff expertise you need on the course leadership team. Who will accompany you and be your co-instructor(s)? Who can contribute to the relationships with students, co-faculty and hosts?

What preparation class or orientation meetings are needed? This depends on the type of class being conducted. Maybe orientation meetings, a Pre-Travel class for credit with its own syllabus, maybe a post-reflective class?

Outline the course and trip details. This includes, destination(s), length of trip, activity-travel study tour, service learning, field research, and what student expertise is needed.

Establish the desired learning outcomes and develop the course syllabus before the itinerary. Considerations include the type of experience and educational preparation required, safety logistics and educational support before departure and during the experience will vary accordingly.

Outline the proposed schedule for the student learning experiences, just as you would do for the activities/laboratories in any class – prepare to describe what resources will be needed at each activity.

Pre-Trip Considerations and Course approval?

Research your university and college rules/guidelines and offices of support to make this possible. Study abroad staff are there to assist with planning the for-credit rules and faculty course approvals, international office approval, budget and rate requests, risk management, insurance, recruiting and travel planning.

Who will do the “on the ground” in –country planning: the lodging, transportation, meals, and activities? Price out everything – estimating budgets is very difficult. Does your institution have a fund rollover year to year?

How many students do you want/need for the study abroad to be feasible budget- and quality of experience-wise? What will be an affordable faculty/staff to student ratio? Are the teachers/faculty paid for 12 months or academic calendar?

Know your students – Which college or university students will be most likely to travel abroad? What criteria do they use to select a course and when/how long should the engaged experience be? When?

Recruitment and Enrollment?

How are you going to recruit—who/what other opportunities are the competition? Students select based on location, expected experience, class teacher/faculty leaders and costs. You must have the cost/price solid before you can expect students to commit.

Stay in regular contact with all students who express interest. Continue to feed students information about the course and trip regularly - they have many other options and attrition is likely. Prepare methods of communication – social media, blogs, etc.

Plan your accounting and receipting methods to manage money for the group expenses. Especially in a predominately cash economy. Plan to reconcile the accounting - direct charges to the credit card, ATM withdrawals in country, and cash expenditures.

Design appropriate Reusable Learning Outcomes (blogs, videos, CDs, pictorial libraries, impact statements) to use in promoting the course in subsequent years. Plan to utilize your learning assessments and assignments to measure effectiveness of the teaching methods. With proper planning and possible need for IRB approval, this can be used as data for scholarly outputs of innovative teaching efforts.

Plan, Plan, Plan and Enjoy and then you return:

Once the trip begins, be flexible and go with the flow. Make it a good experience for everyone. Focus on the students' wellbeing and how they change rather than where and what students experienced.

Continue to ensure health and safety and insist on the buddy or at least three together rules. Reinforce the communications and logistic agreements and ensure that the in-country travel/university hosts are aware of any group concerns or safety concerns. You are responsible for the students' safety and well-being.

Upon return ensure that you and your students send thank you and messages of appreciation and complete all of the academic requirements as well as the financial wrap-up and final accounting.

Adjust the future course syllabus, budgeting, experiences, orientation, and recruiting and retention based on feedback from initial/current student and partner feedback.

Follow-up with the analysis of the student assessment as they will measure teaching effectiveness, learning and serve as data for scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) publications and course improvement.

Enjoy and take lots of pictures and videos!

References

Crawford, P. and W. Fink, 2020, From academia to the workforce: Critical growth areas for students today, Washington, DC: APLU

Karcher, E. and M. Russell, 2020, 21st Century Workplace Employability Skills as Study Abroad Learning Outcomes, NAFSA (virtual poster): Association of International Educators, St. Louis, MO

Karcher, E., S. LaRose, S. Mickelbart, M. Russell and L. White, 2023, Inclusive Excellence Professional Development: Activities and Continuum Workshop, NACTA Conference. June 2023 Las Cruces, NM

Nzaranyimana, T., K. Orvis, and M. Russell, 2020, Assessing Cultural Awareness and International Engagement Skills Through Experiential Learning: The Spring 2018 Study Abroad Experiences in Rural Areas of Peru For Twelve Undergraduate Students From Purdue University in The College Of Agriculture University Agriculture, *NACTA Journal*, <https://www.nactateachers.org/index.php/journal-sp-1148215168>

Russell, M., L. Mixon, E. Byers-Doton and C. Wilson, 2023, Employer priorities for a career-ready workforce for the future of agriculture, NACTA conference, Las Cruces, NM

Submitted by

Jeneen Fields

Mark Russell

Purdue University

West Lafayette, IN