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Being there at a distance

Connecting the academic library to students who study abroad

Like many liberal arts colleges, Colby College prides itself on its global focus, opportunities for undergraduate research, and the high number of students who study abroad during their junior year of college. Because of this, we as reference and research librarians wanted to better connect with our students abroad—students who often go off the radar in the intimate campus-focused environment of a small academic library. In this article, we'd like to talk about our outreach to students before and during study abroad, our assessment of its effects, and what we learned.

From prior research, we learned that librarians often don't take the time to reach out to study abroad students,[1] but that we're increasingly aware of the need for more resources and research support,[2] given the difficulties that students face when they encounter local libraries in a new location.[3] Many study abroad programs are wonderfully inventive in terms of getting students into the local language and culture, but may lack structured support for research outside of class assignments,[4] potentially increasing the need for librarian support. Yet study abroad students rarely use the resources we've made available for them.[5] We know they need electronic versions of print books,[6] and may struggle with online resources,[7] and we believe they could benefit from partnerships between university libraries at home and abroad.[8] All of this literature suggested to us that we needed to explore the experiences of our study abroad students more deeply, as well as see how effective our interventions into their study abroad programs actually were.

Our project

When we began this project during the spring semester in 2015, the Colby College Library had not tried any outreach to study abroad students in a systemic way.[9] In collaboration with Colby's off-campus study office, we wrote a new library guide (see Figure 1) that would have key material about our library for study abroad students, without being overwhelming.

After we developed this guide, we sent an email to all students currently off-campus, providing them access to the guide and letting them know of resources, such as our VPN and databases, which they could access while away from home. We also wanted to make them aware that Colby librarians were available and happy to provide guidance on library research—even from the other side of the world.

A few months later, we followed up on this outreach with a survey to 100 students who had studied off-campus during the 2013–15 academic years. We asked about their projects, the resources they'd used from home or abroad, and what support they needed from the Colby

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College librarians. Thirty eight of these students responded, none of whom had received a library guide, email, or training in advance of going off-campus.

But because we had a lot on our plates, we really wanted to know what effect our outreach was actually having. For this, we emailed students heading off-campus in 2015–16, providing them with information on library services in advance of their departure. We even presented about the VPN and other resources at one of the student meetings prior to going abroad. That May, we again surveyed these students on their awareness and use of campus resources: 18 completed the survey in full, for a total response of 56 students across three years.

What we learned

As we explored the results of these surveys, we found that most off-campus students at Colby College went to Europe for a semester during their junior year—a classic study abroad pattern. Others studied in Asia, the Americas, Africa, and Australia. The majority did a research paper or independent project, and usually in English—meaning that librarians at home could be of assistance in their research. They tended to use journal articles, class materials, and books most often, and a third of students collected original materials, such as interviews, GPS coordinates, or wildlife observations while abroad. (We review and analyze the research aspects of this project in more detail in a forthcoming article).

When asked to comment on their research experiences abroad, students from our small liberal arts college appreciated the opportunity to work at larger university libraries, such as the Bodleian, or alternately the adventure of observing in the field. As one student, Hank, wrote from Tanzania, "I got to create and collect all my own data. It was like I was being a primary source rather than a secondary source!"

Yet students also found it hard to locate resources abroad, to use the local language, to adapt to local libraries, and, in some cases, even to access the Internet. In Namibia, Hannah and her classmates were all "in the same boat without Internet and with limited other resources, so we all adapted and helped each other out." While in China, Edward found that many research materials were blocked by the government. Students asked for things such as access to ebooks and databases, and guides on doing research abroad—resources that they were unaware the library provided.

Yet when struggling to figure out how to do academic research while abroad, only four students reached out to a friend or professor back in Maine. Most asked for help from professors or friends locally or approached a local university library to look for books. Only 13 percent of these students researching abroad asked for help from a librarian at any stage of their research.

The challenge of awareness versus use

For us, the most interesting part of this feedback was that off-campus students were more aware of Colby Library resources after our
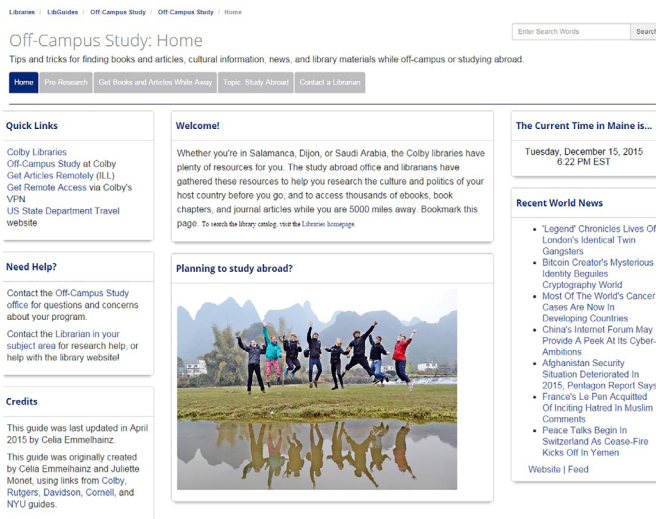

Figure 1. The off-campus study library guide at Colby College.

interventions, but their use of librarians and library resources went up much less. In the chart below you can see growing awareness of our resources, yet no student attempted to reach out to a librarian for help.

When we asked students why they didn't contact a librarian for help, one in four said they didn't need us, and one in five said they didn't know about us. Nico thought that librarians would be on vacation during his summer research in China, and Gwen "was too involved with life abroad to remember that library staff in Maine are available to help," while Mary confidently asserted that "Even my most complex paper was too easy to warrant that kind of effort."

And finally, when we asked students how we could help, they responded asking for more training and outreach, but not necessarily indicating that they needed direct support while abroad. William and Jacob both asked for tutorials before or during study abroad in how to set up a VPN to access databases remotely, and Carrie asked for reminders that librarians are able to help by email. As Ivy wrote from Kenya, "I wish I had realized that I could reach out and that it was totally normal to email a librarian while abroad. I assumed I was on my own for some reason."

Reflections

At first we were abashed that study abroad students hadn't asked for more help after our outreach efforts. But on reflection, we found several encouraging results. The first is that outreach is effective in raising student awareness of and use of library resources. The second is that students deeply appreciate this outreach, regardless of whether they need our research support. We find this encouraging as librarians who want to be there for students but are sometimes concerned about the workload we'll encounter if we advertise too much. Spreading the word widely resulted in much greater appreciation of the library, but only a manageable and modest increase in research requests.

Finally, this project showed us the importance of reaching out to students at the time of need. While this is complicated by varying international schedules for research projects, we find "being there at a distance" a valuable way we can support students while abroad. Because of this, we have joined the orientation for students heading abroad to present library services in person, as well as followed up with email reminders during the semester. We now understand that while students may not approach us after outreach, the outreach is valuable in itself, increasing students' awareness of the library, their sense of being supported by the library, and their use of library resources as a whole.

Year Surveyed	2015	2016
Aware of Colby library website	84%	100%
Aware of Colby databases	81%	89%
…used Colby databases	61%	67%
Aware of interlibrary loan	54%	72%
…used interlibrary loan	9%	12%
Aware of Colby LibGuides	57%	72%
Aware of Colby librarians	59%	83%
…emailed Colby librarians	0%	0%

Notes

1. Eugene A Engeldinger, "Bibliographic instruction for study abroad programs," *C&RL News* 8 (1985): 395.

2. Alica C. White, Yunshan Ye, and Margaret Guccione, "Study abroad students: designing library services to meet their needs," *Journal of Library Administration* 49 (2009): 187-196, and Virginia Connell, "Getting to know the neighbors: library support for study abroad programs," *Library Philosophy & Practice* (2009):1-12.

3. Laurie Kutner, "Think locally, act globally: Understanding home institution library engagement among study-abroad students," *College & Research Libraries* 70 (2009): 158–76.

4. Michael Vande Berg, R. Michael Paige, and Kris Hemming Lou, S*tudent Learning*

Abroad: What our students are learning, what they're not, and what we can do about it (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2012): 4.

5. Nicole J Kendrot, "Academic Library Support for Study Abroad Students," (master's thesis, 2011): 39.

6. Kayo Denda, "Study abroad programs: a golden opportunity for academic library engagement," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 39 (2013): 155–60.

7. Sarah Faye Cohen and Andy Burkhardt, "Even an ocean away: Developing Skype-based reference for students studying abroad," *Reference Services Review* 38, no. 2 (2010): 264–73.

8. Ellen H. Hammond, "Internationalization in higher education and global access in a digital age," *Library Management* 30 (2009): 88-98.

9. We use "off-campus students" and "study abroad students" interchangeably. Colby College refers to this group of students as "off-campus students," but to differentiate from distance education or commuter students, we use "study abroad" to capture the long-distance yet temporary nature of their research projects and study experience. ✐

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their future collaborations with school librarians as teachers in their future classrooms.

Notes

1. Erica Rosenfeld Halverson and Kimberly M. Sheridan, "The Maker Movement in Education," *Harvard Educational Review,* 2014: 495–504.

2. Kate Shively, "Reflections from the Field: Creating an Elementary Living LearningMakerspace," *Learning Communities Research and Practice* 5 (2017): no. 1, Article 3: 1-14. Available at https://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/lcrpjournal/vol5/iss1/3.

3. Gail Oltmanns and John H. Schuh, "Purposes and Uses of Residence Hall Libraries," *College & Research Libraries* (1985): 172–77.

4. Phyllis Rudin, "No Fixed Address: The Evolution of Outreach Library Services on Campus," *The Reference Librarian* (2008): 55–75.

5. Megan Egbert, *Creating Makers: How to Start a Learning Revolution at Your Library* (Santa Barbara, California: Libraries Unlimited, 2016).

6. Shively, "Reflections from the Field: Creating an Elementary Living LearningMakerspace." ✐

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3. George B. Adams. "Badge Pin or Button," New Jersey, 1986, https://www.google.com/patents/US564356, accessed December 12, 2017.

4. Kate Jaggers, "10 Ways to Celebrate Maker Culture," *Library LinkNJ,* http://librarylinknj.org/techex/10-ways-celebrate-maker-culture, accessed December 4, 2017.

5. "Badges to Buttons: Students write about 'Images That Shock,'" Duke University Libraries, https://blogs.library.duke.edu/blog/2014/06/05/images-shock/, accessed December 4, 2017.

6. Kelsi Evans, "Intern Report: Archive Your Pride Event Planning," brought to Light Stories from UCSF Archives & Special Collections, https://blogs.library.ucsf.edu/broughttolight/tag/button-making/, accessed December 4, 2017).

7. Anne T. Switzer. "Redefining Diversity: Creating an Inclusive Academic Library through Diversity Initiatives," *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 15, no. 3 (2008): 280-300, https://valenciacollege.edu/faculty/development/coursesResources/documents/RedefiningDiversityLibrary.pdf.

8. Megan Lotts, "Low-Cost High-Impact Makerspaces at the Rutgers University Art Library," *Art Documentation: Bulletin of The Art Libraries Society of North America* 36, no. 2 (2017): 345–62.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid. ✐