

**The Program:** The First-Year Experience Abroad program offers students the opportunity to continue engaging with ideas from their first semester through participation in a study abroad high impact learning experience. Students attend weekly classes in the first half of the spring semester to explore academic content, learn about another culture, and prepare for their travel experience during spring break. After the week abroad, students return to “unpack” the trip reflecting on what they experienced, what they learned, and what it all meant to them. All of these courses are *one-credit* travel seminars that use the FYET course number; none fulfill the FYE general education requirement. Student learning outcomes are based on three key aspects of personal development: *Develop, Experience, and Reflect*.

- *Develop:* students will learn about the host country’s culture and more about their own culture and experiences
- *Experience:* students will have the opportunity to meet with locals and engage in the country by discovering cultural differences.
- *Reflect:* students will reflect on their experience to make comparisons between their culture and the culture of the country visited as well as beginning to think more globally.

**Student Learning Outcomes:** After taking part in the program students will:

- Increase their ability to interact with and observe cultural differences and consider issues from diverse perspectives (Develop, Experience, Reflect)
- Demonstrate a respect for the cultural differences that exist between the cultural values of the student and the local culture after interpreting their own culture and how it has shaped their values and beliefs (Develop, Reflect)
- Integrate continuous global learning into their academic and personal lives and explore international opportunities after returning home (Experience, Reflect)

**Assessment Question:** Our assessment goals were centered around how students understood and created meaning from our FYE Abroad academic courses. We wanted to understand the narratives that students had about the experience and examine how they aligned with our overall student learning outcomes.

**Approach:** We used a qualitative research approach to examine our spring 2013 FYE Abroad cohort’s experience in two of our courses – History and Sociology of English Football and Biomedical Ethics and Genetics in Berlin. We ran a series of focus groups that captured 50% of course participants and then followed up with these two groups using an online questionnaire (n= 14 of 24). Our analysis of the transcripts from our focus group interviews revealed four general data categories that best represent the student narratives that we captured: *Student Development, Trip Experiences, Study Abroad Preparation, and Course Reflection*.

## STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

**Student Development Outcomes:** The FYE Abroad program was intentionally designed to have an Express I academic component that met weekly for the 7-8 weeks prior to the travel experience. Students indicated that this was a crucial part of the experience that prepared them for their in country experience:

- “I thought the classes leading up to it were also really helpful, a constant, a weekly reminder [that] I am going to Berlin in a month or two. So we could focus on things, the types of things we might learn while we are there.”

In addition, it is a crucial component of their experience and one of the defining components that separates these experiences from a one-week tourist-style experience to a particular location.

- “I think that is the difference between the course and if we had just gone on vacation and just gone of the trip. That would have been a lot of fun and everything, but by connecting it with the journal and the class it really made it more of a full experience with their culture.”

Finally the course provided a sense of community within the group that facilitated the travel component:

- “I think that the express class was important. At first I questioned was it was so long. But, for all of us to get to know each and get used to meeting regularly, I thought that was important.”

We also found that, while the travel component was attractive to students, all of the students indicated that it was the academic subject matter that was the primary attraction to the program

**Student Development Paths Forwards:** These comments are typical of the group as a whole. Students appreciated creating connections to the subject matter and preparing for the place-based learning they would be doing while abroad. The course would not be as successful with out this academic component. As we encourage faculty to develop a broad range of offerings in the program, the creation of the Express I academic component will be the keystone to course development.

## TRIP EXPERIENCE

**Trip Experience Outcomes:** One concern we had in developing this program was that it would be difficult to create an intercultural experience in just one week of in-country time. It was important to us that the trip was grounded in an experience that was much more than a tourist style trip. In many ways the student narratives suggest that we have accomplished some of that goal in regards to an intercultural experience, through the intellectual connections to culture the courses make. Despite the abbreviated experience, our students were able to observe distinct aspects of our host cultures:

- “You don’t have those fake fans. Like Man City grew really recently and got to the top really fast and I feel like, it wasn’t one big family. It was a huge stadium, the chants were cool, but in Nottingham they had some of those songs that you only new if you grew up there. Die hard fans. When we saw them play at Barnley. Their entire section was louder than the rest of stadium. How strongly they back teams even at the lower levels.” (talking about the different levels of English soccer leagues)
- “I think its important because especially in Germany with its divided history. It gave us a chance to see what it was like, to compare the former Soviet Union and the west and you can really see that difference through the museum we saw, the memorials, even the architecture, you could see the difference and it is important to understand the difference. You can read about it in a text book, but until you go and see it I think that really impacts the picture that you see and maybe other cultures that you would learn about or visit”

To the more general experience of a foreign city:

- “I think it gives a good idea of how things are so much different than America. There are a lot more countries with different things. I think just going on the underground and knowing the layout of the city. I feel like with the itinerary and the maps, everyone figured out how to get around the city quite well”
- “I think Berlin is a very international city and I had not realized that ahead of time..so that was cool because you didn’t just experience German culture, you experienced Italian culture and you got to see different types of food and people. So many people from around the world.”
- “I think I definitely had a good taste of cultural. We were walking around the city quite a lot and I think that gives you a good insight into how Berliners live around the city as well.”

But there was also the recognition that a truly immersive experience required a longer stay:

- “I think that for global learning. I think that we would have to sit in a German classroom to get that effect. I think we can go over as a group and do our own thing and not get how they learn over in Germany”

This idea was carried over into student narratives that also revealed an interest in a more direct experience with student culture in a foreign city:

- “Actually, I wish we had more time with the University students. I feel like even though we went to dinner with the Manchester Students we couldn’t really talk with them as much as you wanted to. Same with Nottingham, we toured it but it wasn’t like you were really with them.”
- “I wanted to spend a little more time with the Manchester students. I liked how they gave us a tour around everything. I thought it was ...it gave people an idea of what the [student] culture was all about.”
- “I think I was already interested in that ahead of time, but it kind of peaked my interest for especially going to the university and walking around their campus I remember thinking, huh, I wonder if I could manage to go to grad school here or something. But then I realized that I didn’t speak German.”

Finally, it was important to the students to have a balance to the trip in which academic experiences were also coupled with the ability for students to explore the city on their own. One of the students described this not as free time, but rather as “experience-time”.

***Trip Experience Paths Forward:*** As the program has matured we have been able to create intentional moments where students interact with the host country cultures, while also giving them some freedom to create those connections on their own as they explored the city. While not necessarily our intention at the outset, it is clear that connections to student culture were an important and impactful part of our UK trip. The College has several strong connections to Universities in the region that facilitate this type of intercultural experience. Based on our assessment we hope to encourage building these connections for students in our future courses.

## STUDY ABROAD PREPARATION

***Study Abroad Preparation Outcomes:*** One of the learning objectives of the FYE abroad program is to give them the confidence to consider the idea of longer experiences and help them prepare for a longer experience later in their academic career. The narratives students share with us support this notion from the simple level of confidence in leaving the country:

- “Learning like the flying route internationally, checking in, learning to exchange money and all that is something you are going to have to do no matter where you go...”
- “I think I definitely want to do at least a semester now. I think before I was ...it definitely opened up my eyes...I want to be there longer.”

The students also indicated how these high impact experience fits into their educational goals:

- “I have always thought that international experiences are a good idea, especially during college since it’s a main time for self-development. This program re-emphasized this for me and illustrated to me the many options of study lengths.”
- “It allowed me to see how much I enjoy new places and how traveling abroad makes you more well rounded because you don’t think within the realm of your own location but on the world in a large scale. So basically it broadened my horizons.”

The practicalities of study abroad are also examined early to allow for preparation and understand some of the exchanges that are set-up between institutions:

- “If anything, from just a practical standpoint you can be scheduling classes around so that you could. That way if you all of a sudden have the desire second semester of your sophomore year you will have a really hard time fitting it all in. At least now after your second semester of your freshman year you can start planning towards it.”
- “I think that a lot of people are scared of the transferring of going abroad and I think this trip gave kids a good idea of how well organized the sister schools are. It seems like transferring back and forth is really easy and fitting in is pretty good and really easy. But everything, it definitely makes you want to study abroad more. Gives you confidence....”

Another, perhaps surprising, result was that this experience also allowed students to decided that longer programs were not for them:

- “I don’t know, the way I looked at it you go there a week early and see how it is. You want to see if you want to do the semester. Then I think I kind of realized that I don’t want to do a full semester, but definitely going there for a week was worth it, I really enjoyed it”
- “For me I was never really interested in studying abroad until I did the trip. And even now, I don’t see myself as someone that will spend a semester in another country just because I don’t really, its just not what I want to do. But, it did encourage me to want to travel more.”

**Study Abroad Preparation Paths Forward:** One of the explicit goals of the program is to encourage students to think about study abroad at a time in their college career when they can most effectively plan for a future, more extensive experience. Many of our students indicated that this was one of the reasons that they registered for this course. Another student narrative revealed that some also discovered after the trip that while they might like to travel, a study abroad experience later was not for them. One of the goals of the program in the coming years is to develop, in conjunction with our Study Abroad office, a small piece of curriculum that will help students begin planning for a future experience if they choose that path.

## REFLECTION

**Reflection Outcomes:** Reading responses and reflections have been built into the FYE abroad program curriculum as the UK and Berlin courses have developed. Instructors saw them as important ways to prepare for the trip and record student experience while on the trip. Student experiences reinforce this key component of the courses. They saw it as an important part of the pre-travel course and one of the important academic components of the trip experience:

- “When we went abroad we were going and going every day. So having to answer the reflective questions gave us the time to see what we all go to do and take it all in.”
- “I didn’t mind writing them at all. It gave us a chance to reflect. I know that Pete wrote in his Journal every night. And so like giving them a journal and saying we only have a few mandatory questions and nudging them in that direction is going to kind of make them reflect even more.”
- “Reflection questions were helpful in the retention of activities and information, and in forming an overall mental connectivity of the learning. I found these to be very helpful in forming opinions and actually having "take-aways" from the experience.”
- “It made me sit down and evaluate all of my experiences. It also made me connect the discussion questions to the cultural experiences.”
- “The reflection questions helped to slow down and digest all that we had been experiencing. They are a nice to look back on so that I can remember everything that we were doing. I liked the journal questions a lot. I'm very glad we did them because they help keep the trip fresh in my mind.”

**Reflection Paths Forward:** The conversations students had about the trip constantly came back to the journaling and reflecting that forged connections between the trip and the subject matter they were studying. Our assessment suggests that this should remain a key, required component of FYE Abroad curriculum development. In addition it is a natural place to observe student learning in this program to assess how well our students are achieving the overall program learning objectives.

## ONGOING ASSESSMENT

**Future Assessment Goals:** In support of our first learning outcome, we are going to continue to collect data about FYE Abroad participants and their future study abroad participation. Moving forward we are also developing a final reflective assignment that can capture student progress in thinking about intercultural differences and values. The goal is create a framework that can be employed in courses with any subject matter or locale. This last assignment or reflection will be examined with a rubric that has been modified from the AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge Rubric. We believe this culminating assignment would provide a perfect opportunity for ongoing assessment of learning objectives two and three.