Re-Integrating the Study Abroad and Elon Campus Experiences

by

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Carnegie Campus Project

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**Introduction**

A significant trend in higher education is the movement to an "expanded classroom." Generally referred to as "experiential education," programs such as study abroad, service-learning, cooperative education, and internships are intended to provide students with an opportunity to integrate classroom concepts and out-of-classroom experiences (Katula and Threnhauser 1999). Such opportunities can not only enhance students' conceptual skills and awareness of social issues but also provide an experience base valued by employers (Cates-McIver 1998, Coleman 1998).

Elon College recognizes the value of the expanded classroom and requires each student to complete an Experiential Learning Requirement (ELR) before graduation. Many options exist for students to meet their ELR. Study abroad courses are a favorite among the options. Forty-six percent of May 1999 Elon graduates participated in study abroad (William Rich, personal communication). This fact has earned the college national recognition as a leader in study abroad.

**Topic for Study**

Many of us who have studied abroad believe the experience had a profound impact on our lives, from career choices to with whom we form close friendships (see Appendix). Whereas academic journals in the field of education may contain articles assessing various aspects of cooperative education, internships, or service learning, they contain extremely little analysis of study abroad. Journals from fields other than education similarly do not regularly contain articles that systematically assess overseas study. We propose a new 300-level General Studies course in which we can study the study abroad experience.
Students generally return from travel study programs extremely eager to share their experiences with others. Frequently they learn that although they could talk for hours about their experiences most people are interested in only a five-minute synopsis. After study abroad re-integration into the campus community can be difficult. The student who has studied abroad often has matured faster than friends who did not do so and the campus itself may simply feel smaller than prior to world travel. The proposed course, "Study Abroad: Analyzing Your International Experience" will create space for recently returned students to reflectively integrate their study abroad experiences into their lives through sharing, comparing and contrasting their experiences abroad. It will give students, teaching/research assistants, and course instructor space to channel their enthusiasm for their overseas experiences into creative exploration of how travel study programs may be shaped by length of stay, pre-existing knowledge of places and cultures encountered, type of study tour undertaken, and other criteria. Such intellectual engagement will enable members of the class to discover how enhanced cultural awareness, personal growth, and academic understanding of the countries in which they studied need not end simply because they are no longer overseas. The course will thus serve to enhance students' appreciation for life long learning.

In addition to helping students in the course to make more sense of their overseas experiences the course is expected to generate findings which will help to enhance the experiences of students who will study abroad in the future. Findings from research on study abroad will be shared with the Office of International Programs, which could disseminate this information to future study abroad students via their program leaders. We anticipate that our ability to understand what works extremely well and what areas of our study abroad programs could use some adjusting will be enhanced each time the course is taught.
Study team

The team will consist of five individuals with study abroad experience, including four students (Cortney Berben--Biology, Awel Gheddai--Corporate Communications, Nick Parsons--Sociology, and Janetta Tolliver--International Studies) and Dr. Glaesel. The students will serve as teaching/research assistants (TA/RAs) whose responsibilities will include:

- meeting with each other and the course instructor in the summer and fall prior to the course being offered to continue to refine the course's content and design
- one formal presentation each to the class early on of his or her study abroad related research project undertaken during the summer, fall, or winter before the class is taught
- serving as a group leader for one-fifth of the students in the class (course instructor is responsible for one-fifth of students). As group leader the TA/RA serves as a mentor for the students' major projects, as well as a sounding board for other assigned work. As a mentor the TA/RA will hold outside of class meetings as needed with their group and individuals in it to provide feedback on progress to date, help acquire any special materials needed, arrange for transportation to project sites, and so forth
- evaluation of student work
- weekly meetings with the course instructor and other TA/RAs to share successes, brainstorm about how to overcome challenges related to student projects, discuss evaluation criteria for different types of student work prior to and after formal grading of it
- additional duties as determined by the study team over the course of the semester

A volunteer pre-study team of Dr. Glaesel and four recently returned study abroad students (Benita Appiah-Pinkrah, Michael Bartone, Cortney Berben, and Janetta Tolliver) has been meeting to discuss course design. We believe a key research question to be addressed by students taking the course should be: "What are the similarities and differences between various study abroad experiences and why do they exist?" Students will answer this question by responding to other students' experiences in class and through short papers. Another important research question to be answered will be "How do I incorporate what I have learned abroad into my other classes and my life in general?" This question will be addressed through projects, reflection papers, and class discussion. In addition, students will research "What is the impact of study abroad on career and life decisions?" by refining, distributing, and analyzing a survey we
started to write for recently graduated Elon students who studied abroad. Students will work with the Office of International Programs and be given access to their information on study abroad participants over the past five years. The research will address some of the assessment needs of the office and the college in general.

Although the instructor has travel study experience in the Americas, Europe, and Africa, often it will be students who know more about particular places and study abroad programs. The class will be an opportunity for student-instructor and student-student partnership building, a vital component of cooperative learning (Adams et al. 1997).

**Details of the teaching-learning setting**

**Course description:** Study Abroad: Analyzing your International Experience

This course is designed for students who have studied abroad and would like to reflect upon and expand their understanding of their experiences overseas in a shared learning setting. Students will take turns teaching the class based on their area of travel study. We will explore such questions as how does the intensity of our connection to home influence the quality of our experience abroad? What does it mean to have a “good time”? In what ways are we vulnerable when traveling? We will explore issues of identity and place, ideology (values, norms, customs), society (conformity/autonomy, gender, class), and structure (religious, political, economic) as we share, analyze, and reflect upon our international experiences. The course contains significant research and service learning components.

Note: The four credit 300-level course is anticipated to be offered each spring and cross-listed with whichever department is hosting the course. Dr. Glaesel will lead the study team for the pilot course.
Course content and requirements: The course begins with theoretical background to intercultural communication. Discussion is a key component of class time. Students are required to actively participate in class discussions, undertake hands-on experiential projects, and write several papers.

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<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Three short papers (1-3 pages each)</td>
<td>10 percent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final paper/grant proposal (10-12 pages)</td>
<td>20 percent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minor experiential project</td>
<td>5 percent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Major experiential project and paper</td>
<td>30 percent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Journal</td>
<td>20 percent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presentation, teaching, participation</td>
<td>15 percent</td>
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Required readings for "Analyzing Your International Experience" (subject to change):

- Stewart, Edward C. and Milton J. Bennett (1991) *American Cultural Patterns: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Intercultural Press. The book is a bit old, but I believe it will be valuable for the vast majority of the students in the class to critically examine their own culture before undertaking cross-cultural comparison.

We will also use current newspaper articles, selections from personal journals, on-line international newspapers, cross-cultural simulation games, and classic studies.

Class participation: Students are expected to actively take part in discussions based on their interpretation of readings, visual images, and experiences abroad. Each student will be responsible for teaching part of one class as well as present a description and interpretation of successes and failures of his or her major project for the class.

Short papers: Students will write five 1 to 3 page essays analyzing their study abroad experiences. At least one short paper will be a description of how students expect to continue to use and re-integrate their study abroad experience in courses beyond "Study Abroad: Analyzing
Your International Experience." In other papers students will reflect on assigned topics and those of their choice. Students will share their best papers with the broader community by posting them on the web.

**Minor project:** Students and their mentors will help organize and execute a Study Abroad College Coffee or other appropriate event during International Week. The study abroad coffee serves to advertise programs, distribute brochures, and offer select foods from program countries. The event allows students to showcase their scrapbooks, culinary skills, and discuss their study abroad program with others. Faculty are also given the opportunity to introduce themselves to students interested in their program.

**Major project:** A major component of the course for each student will be a service learning or other experiential project in which intellectual engagement is fostered by applying knowledge to real life situations. Possibilities abound. Some students might put in hours with Habitat for Humanity and research and write a paper contrasting low-income housing in the United States with that of a country in which they studied abroad. Others might volunteer at Crossroads and research and write a comparative paper on Violence Against Women. Sierra Club activists might contrast their work with that undertaken in their study country. Arts students might design a mural on study abroad and approach local high schools or middle schools with the offer to paint. Students would volunteer their time. The schools could foot the bill for the paint. This project has the added benefit of getting high school students to consider attending Elon and raising awareness of travel study for credit. Returned study abroad students might share their experiences with area K-12 students as visiting speakers. Some students might work with media resources to create videos or CDs to promote study abroad.
Journal: Many students will have written journals as part of their study abroad experience. Students will have weekly guided journal entries in which they reflect upon and connect their overseas and reentry experiences with new information from readings and class discussions.

Final paper (grant proposal or application for additional experience overseas): With assistance from the study team, students will write and re-write application essays for opportunities to return overseas for graduate study, research, or work experience through Fulbright, Rotary Club, Peace Corps, School for International Training, other appropriate organization or academic institution.

Budget summary

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>$3100</td>
<td>for funds to hire adjunct to teach a survey geography course Dr. Glaesel would normally teach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$2600</td>
<td>study team stipends ($650/student for four weeks working 20 hrs./week during the semester as well as pre- and post-course work and work during the semester outside of their term as head TA/RA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$300</td>
<td>for minor and major projects (for supplies, transportation, etc.)</td>
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$6000

Sharing results

Students in the new course will share their projects on the web, on and off campus. In the long run we hope to share our survey results, successes, and possible struggles associated with Re-Integrating the Study Abroad and Elon Campus Experiences. One means of information sharing will be a collaborative (instructor and student) chapter in a publication stemming from the results of Elon's three-year study. Highlights from the publication could be presented in at the American Association for Higher Education annual meeting and, possibly serve as the basis of an article in the Journal of Geography.
Conclusion

In the past two decades, Study Abroad Programs have grown remarkably. A rising number of formal contracts between universities and colleges in the United States and the rest of the world make it easy for students to study abroad (Katula and Threnhauser 1999). In the late 1990s nearly 90,000 US students traveled abroad annually. This figure is close to double the number that studied abroad in 1980 (Desruisseaux 1998).

We have enthusiasm for and experience in areas related to the proposed project (see Appendix). Intellectual engagement would be fostered by bringing to the classroom and beyond the results of discovery in the field including the new ways of looking at the world gained by leaving home and a familiar culture. Students would apply their language, artistic and other skills in projects recommended in this proposal. The new course will enhance the conditions for learning in multiple programs and departments across the Elon College campus.

The benefits of experiential learning on student enthusiasm for and retention of material are widely documented (Adams et al. 1997; Lindquist 1997; Mills and Cottel 1998). In addition, studies have found that experiential learning promotes the acceptance of diverse values and people (Cohen 1998, Millis and Cottel 1998). Study abroad is thus one way to prepare future teachers and the US public in general to be informed members of an increasingly diverse country and global community (Myers Jr. 1997).
References


Rich, William 1999. Personal communication with Dean of International Programs, Elon College.
APPENDIX

Reflections from the study team: How study abroad changed our lives

Cortney Berben: The cardinal factor of my decision to study in Ghana was the rarity of the opportunity. It is no vacation spot for the white collar traveler; it doesn't offer the romance of the Eiffel tower or the prestige of Stonehenge. In my quest for a unique adventure I discovered an even more precious offering. Ghana gave me a first hand lesson in humanity. I left there with an infinitely more valuable understanding of how universal people really are.

My experience in Ghana has tremendously influenced many aspects of my life. I have a deepened understanding and acceptance of diversity, and a strengthened belief in preserving a country's culture and history. I have been humbled by the perseverance of people in true poverty. In addition to this evolution in personal perspective, I also felt it necessary to re-examine my future plans.

The time I spent in Ghana provided my with an invaluable tool for making a decision on whether to join the Peace Corps after graduation. Regardless of how much an individual tries to imagine themselves in the role, nothing can bring it home like actually stepping in the waters of uncertainty. The job of a Peace Corps volunteer is an intensely demanding one. One I felt unqualified in promoting myself for, when I hadn't experienced anything like it. I am truly privileged by my time in Ghana; it made one of my life's critical decisions and easy one.

Heidi Glaesel: Study Abroad was a very meaningful part of my undergraduate education. Studying abroad and participating in two domestic exchange programs in high school were life changing experiences for me. They inspired me to paint murals in my high school to promote
domestic exchange programs. My first murals were undertaken as a volunteer, later I obtained a paid position painting murals in my school.

As an undergraduate at Cornell University I lived in "Language House" upon returning from study abroad in Germany. Language House was divided into sub-units for different languages (Spanish, Italian, German, French) which students planned to or had used studying abroad. Commitment to the house consisted of speaking the foreign language exclusively while in the house, including at shared meals.

Studying abroad as an undergraduate inspired me to travel to Kenya to teach secondary school for 18 months upon graduation. While there I reflected on a course I had taken at Cornell entitled "Analysis of the International Experience." I realized that my stay in Kenya, though rewarding, was limited by my unfamiliarity with the Swahili language. I determined I would return to Kenya as a Swahili speaker. I decided to enter graduate school to pursue a career in Geography and African Studies.

Upon my return from dissertation fieldwork in Kenya I lived in an international house for graduate students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Half of the residents were United States citizens and half were foreign nationals. As a graduate student I also gained experience with outreach to area schools. Through the African Studies Program I occasionally taught K-12 students about Africa.

Since joining the Elon community I have organized two college coffees with a study abroad theme and secured a $1000 Program Initiative Grant to create slide and CD materials to publicize and promote study abroad. To date, three slides trays with images from the Aboriginal Australia, Café Europa, and Ghana programs have become part of the permanent Learning Resources Center collection. The first CD for promotion of the Ghana program has been
completed. It contains program information, photographs, audio and video segments, and web links to related resources. Copies of the CD have been distributed to international programs, the library/LRC, admissions, Ghana Abroad Program leaders, and the students and faculty member who made the CD.

Nick Parsons: This past January, I was fortunate enough to get the opportunity to travel half way around the world in order to study a different culture than the one I have grown so accustomed to these past twenty years. The month was filled with events and stories that would leave an imprint in my mind for months and hopefully years to come. The study abroad trip helped me to understand myself a little bit more and gave me some ideas as to how I could better live my own life.

Some of experiences I encountered cannot easily be put into words, as anyone who visited Aboriginal Australia with me can attest to. The outback proved to be the most nurturing part of the trip due to the virgin beaches, ancient trees, and wholesome people. I certainly reinforced my appreciation for nature by being in a national park in which I saw only one other individual during a time span of four days. Vows of silence, neglect of easy technologies, and sleeping under the brightest starry sky I’ve ever seen contributed to the realization of the world I so often forget about. These, plus a multitude of other special events forced me to question my own life and the way I have been living it.

A lot of the time in my daily life, I find myself doing ordinary things because I have convinced myself that my choices are limited. Quite often I create unnecessary little fears inside of my messed-up little head. These fears prevent me from enjoying life as much as I potentially could. Quite often I allow myself to get sucked into the worldwide rat race of cheap, chaotic,
accessible garbage like movies and fashion and gossip and worrying about what other people say about me. I’ve known for quite some time the road to satisfaction but along the way I’ve suffered detours and pit stops and even gotten lost once or twice…

Throughout my trip I encountered some truly genuine people that helped me to realize these truths. These people did not possess many of the false fears and short-lived limits that many seem to have added to their disposition. These people had respectable accomplishments and wonderful attitudes about life – I think everybody knows what is truly important in life; these people actually lived accordingly on such fundamental knowledge. Their conscience has a loving, energetic, generous and optimistic voice that they heed without question.

As I’ve said, I have known my own path to happiness for as long as I can remember, I just haven’t chosen to walk along it much. Studying abroad in Australia truly helped to reinforce and reaffirm those instinctual feelings of mine regarding how to attain what I want out of life. A completely different Aboriginal culture helped me to compare and appreciate my own, as well as better see the perspectives of powerless minorities. I’m rather grateful for my unique experiences and remain confident that parts of this trip will remain with me for the rest of my life.

Janetta Tolliver: The study abroad experience for me was one that has changed my life in more than one way. I decided about a year ago that I wanted to experience more than just college life in the United States. I must admit that initially I did not know what I was getting myself into. There were to be only six other students from Elon in the program, no faculty, and a language barrier. But despite the initial fear I decided that this trip was exactly what I wanted and needed. Spain gave me a realization of how so many of us are so comfortable with our everyday lives.
From the very first day in Europe I realized that I had definitely made the right decision studying abroad.

My experience in Spain was like no other. I learned so much about everyday life lesson. I was fortunate enough to live with a Spanish family that was absolutely wonderful. This part of the experience I must say was most influential. I say this because I come from a single parent home and I am an only child. To be placed with a family that had three sons and another student in the exchange program from Japan changed many of my preconceived ideas and experiences. The time spent in my home was so beneficial in the shaping of the person I am today. I was able to appreciate more what it is like to be in another place but feel just as comfortable and at the same time learn so much. The experience culturally was incredible and is very dear to my heart.

My time in Spain gave me more than words can express. The sheer appreciation and understanding many have not yet experienced is indescribable. I have found more happiness, knowledge of other places not only of Europe but of Africa and Asia as well. The awareness that there is more to life than what we see has made me a more complete person and because of this I would not trade this experience for anything that I have experienced thus far in my life.