

CURQ Web Vignettes

Preparing Undergraduates for Research Projects in Faculty-led, Short-term Study-Abroad Courses

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Although valuable experiences, undergraduate research and study abroad often function in vacuums. Elon University offers a January-term course in France entitled “Eat, Pray, Love: Sacred Space and the Place of Religion in 21st Century France.” Students conduct on-site research, explore trans-historical notions of sacred space and perceptions of religious experience in France through gastronomy, art, and architecture; and look at shifts in national identity vis-à-vis religion due to decolonization and immigration. They examine cultural-studies texts, scholarly articles, news, films, and music, and visit cafés, vineyards, cathedrals, abbeys, castles, mosques, synagogues, temples, and museums.

There is no language requirement, but using the language in meaningful ways regardless of experience is vital, even in this three-week program. The brief on-site duration does not imply that “immersive” aspects are impossible. Actually, scholars cite limits to immersion as a learning strategy, suggesting that more valuable than time spent in a place is student/faculty engagement during the experience. Vande Berg, Paige and Lou insist that “students learn and develop effectively and appropriately when educators intervene more intentionally” through well-designed assignments and small-group meetings, for example. They need “opportunities for reflection on meaning-making,” and “the data show that students learn and develop considerably more when educators prepare them to become more self-reflective, culturally self-aware, and aware of ‘how they know what they know’” (Vande Berg et al 2012, 21).

Scaffolded curricular elements in our program include a 15-hour pre-departure course. Students discuss French culture, write journals, address prompts, cite evidence and analyze texts. They treat topics that counter their cultural conditioning, exploring French cultural perspectives and drawing cultural comparisons on space, place, and religion. On site in France, they examine texts on sacred space and identity. Besides content-specific outcomes, other goals of the study abroad entail developing writing, speaking, reading, and critical-thinking skills, diversifying and enriching their education in ways not possible on campus, and having meaningful contact with locals. Upon return, students reflect on the experience. Weeks after re-entry, they submit a research project, a photographic essay with well-reasoned analysis that, ideally, raises the level of discourse on the

topic. Projects use France as a resource, and interdisciplinarity is encouraged. Throughout the fall pre-departure course and the winter terms, students develop an essential question that their research will address. They learn to articulate the importance of their question and the implications of their research; they also refine their methodologies in order to clearly answer their question and draw conclusions that result from synthesizing their findings. Assessed on thoroughness, analysis, evidence, and readability, previously completed journals serve as incremental preparation. Teaching students to write better and communicate clearly and concisely are key. In today’s high school culture of expository writing that often summarizes more than it analyzes, insistence on analysis, reflection and reaction (not reporting) fosters rigor. Students with the most promising completed research projects are invited to present at the Spring Undergraduate Research Forum held annually at Elon.

Two major issues emerge when preparing students for research in this course. The first is experience. Participants in short-term study abroad at Elon are often sophomores. While some conduct in-depth research during their undergraduate studies, “[m]any students do not even begin to think about research until the end of their 3rd year, and they come to the process ill-prepared and uninformed about potential topics, research methods, databases and a plethora of other subjects” (Glasco 2013). However, this process embodies “a continuum that begins with getting students interested in research and later involves helping them identify their interests, find a mentor, and become actively involved in the research process” (Levenson 2010). Nurturing the mentor/mentee relationship and working with professors whose expertise is in the topics students will research are imperatives.

The second issue is students’ perception of research in a humanities context (DeVries 2001, 154). When visualizing research, students often imagine labs and traditional images associated with scientific disciplines. They must understand that their experience abroad embodies field work and represents an invaluable primary source. They must learn that primary sources may be in written form, but also may constitute visual and auditory representations such as paintings, photographs, recordings, live performances, and even and especially their personal journals and notes from guides’ lectures on site. Adventurous, confident students may even interview locals, potentially a highly original primary source.

Besides the brevity, “another drawback of short-term SA is its traditional configuration as ‘sheltered’ or ‘island’ programs wherein U.S. students are grouped together. As a result,

participants may experience superficial cultural contact ... and an isolating group orientation" (Allen 2010, 454). While challenging for short-term programs, personal connections and networking play an integral role in opportunities to meet and interact with both Americans and French citizens studying, working, and living abroad. Our students reported that these interactions were enormously valuable and meaningful. Engaging tour guides to whom a course syllabus with learning goals is supplied in advance also distinguishes the experience. Tours tailored to course content and guides prepared to engage with students and answer questions regarding related topics promote authentic intercultural exchange. In order to avoid the "island" effect when possible, our course calendar is meticulously arranged so that students have a "bucket list" of goals to accomplish and task-oriented free exploration time that encourages reflection and interaction with locals. Although they meet with professors daily (for guidance on methodology and finding resources in France), work on-site is self-directed to actively hone their own learning process and project. Passarelli and Kolb iterate the vast possibilities for learning relationships during study abroad. They cite professors, staff, peers, roommates, tour guides, local citizens, and even tourists as sources that might comprise "a student's network of learning relationships abroad" (Passarelli and Kolb 2012, 157).

Pre-departure reflection develops confidence and critical inquiry, but examining gains abroad and active re-entry are equally crucial to transforming the in-country experience into authentic learning. *Maximizing Study Abroad* (Paige et al. 2007, 154) cites the ability to conduct research despite linguistic/cultural differences and the quality of inquisitiveness as two gains of international experiences. Identifying learning outcomes, resources, and challenges for research abroad enhances the experience, but ultimately post-return assessment, public presentations, and mentor/mentee relationships will reveal the efficacy of faculty-led short-term study abroad courses. 

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International Community-Based Research: Undergraduate Research with Impact

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Defiance College's model of international undergraduate research provides opportunities for students and faculty to interact across geographic and political boundaries to effect change. This model, developed by Defiance College's McMaster School for Advancing Humanity, is focused on community-based research within the context of interdisciplinary learning communities in international settings, and has been operational for over a decade. Project sites over the last ten years, many in developing countries, have included locations in Guatemala, Belize, Thailand, Jamaica, Cambodia, Ghana, and Tanzania.

Che, Spearman, and Manizade describe such locations as "less familiar destinations [that] have the potential to challenge and stretch American students' perspectives and paradigms, thus contributing to a more aware global citizenry" (Lewin 2009). These sites offer a workable match between challenges facing a community partner and the resources and skills of the college's faculty and student researchers.

Some characteristics, I believe, are critical to developing sustainable international partnerships. First, all partners must be committed to building on the strengths of the community and academicians involved. Community partners must be willing to contribute to student learning. In addition, we have focused on developing partners who are willing to invest in joint projects in which there is real potential to produce positive measurable outcomes for

human wellbeing (Studer 2013). Finally, it is critical when developing partnerships that they have the potential for faculty and student researchers to contribute to sustainable positive developments that are community-directed.

After a site has been selected and partners have engaged in identifying projects that could be implemented by a multidisciplinary group of researchers, teams are selected through a competitive process and, subsequently, year-long learning communities are formed. These learning communities have overarching learning outcomes aligned with both the college's mission statement and the goals of the McMaster School. This dynamic program challenges student and faculty researchers to utilize collaborations with the international partners to strategically address community issues—thus marrying real world knowledge and context with academic scholarship. Each learning community has autonomy to develop its specific learning outcomes based on the location, community partners, and faculty involved in the project. For example, the learning outcomes for the McMaster Belize learning community center on developing a capacity for research; developing a contextual framework; developing a connection with community; and developing cultural competence.

The McMaster School's model incorporates the tenets of community-based research, including (1) supporting collaboration between the academic and the community partners; (2) facilitating the creation of new knowledge from multiple sources and the appropriate dissemination of knowledge; and (3) working toward the goals of social action or social change (Strand et al. 2003). In addition, this model is built on a foundation of best practices, including those outlined in the Association of American Colleges and Universities' publication *High-Impact Educational Practices* (Kuh 2008). Kuh's high-impact practices call for students to engage in activities that increase the possibility that they will interact with individuals from another culture. Within these high-impact practices, students should receive regular feedback from both faculty and their peers, as well as have opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills in different settings. These characteristics are integral to the activities of each McMaster learning community, since their projects are writing-intensive, involve students in undergraduate research, and offer the students the opportunity to collaborate with peers, professors, and partners in a diverse environment (Kuh 2008).

Within CUR's *Characteristics of Excellence in Undergraduate Research* (2012), it is noted that best practices call for research to be integrated with other high-impact practices, which our program does. The support of the McMaster School for both its faculty fellows and student scholars is

an explicit commitment from the institution in terms of funding, faculty development, and recognition—which are all components identified as critical factors in identifying excellence in undergraduate research. The McMaster initiatives, through their respective learning communities, embody such student-centered best practices as (1) providing students with developmentally appropriate expectations and intellectual ownership; (2) supporting a community of student scholars; (3) facilitating peer mentoring and teamwork opportunities; and (4) assessing student learning (Council on Undergraduate Research 2012).

For example, the McMaster Belize initiative, operational since 2005, has supported over seventy community-based research projects in multiple disciplines. This interdisciplinary project has included research efforts designed to help remediate environmental degradation, poverty, food insecurity, and limited access to education and health. Cumulative project efforts with some partners have resulted in, among other effects, greater profitability within agricultural cooperatives and communities; reduced negative agricultural impacts on waterways and on soil degradation; and implementation of innovative educational pedagogy, including educational technology. Other efforts have improved access to clean water, improved infrastructure through installation of solar-energy equipment, improved community entrepreneurship, and increased empowerment of women through education and employment.

A wide variety of assessment mechanisms have been implemented to gauge students' capacity for conducting research and their development of cultural competence. We have also assessed our efforts to impact international partners.

As Streitwieser writes, "... a question that can only be studied in another culture enables, and in fact requires, a deeper engagement and integration of activities with reflection during time abroad. But this benefit is not confined only to the finite period of studying abroad" (2009, 406). We see positive changes in students' self-definition and exponential advances in students' learning and development of self-efficacy as by-products of their work through scholarship to improve the human condition. 

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Undergraduate Field Research in Brazil: Encouraging Students Underrepresented in the Geosciences

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The NSF-supported Research Experiences for Undergraduates program at the University of Minnesota, Morris (UMM) is a faculty-led, summer research-abroad program that involves two weeks of field research in Brazil and six weeks of field and laboratory research in Minnesota. The undergraduate research builds on a long-established collaborative research effort between faculty at UMM and the Universidade de Sao Paulo (USP). REU participants—all women, due to the underrepresentation of women in the geosciences, study glacial deposits of the Late Paleozoic Paraná lobe of Brazil and the Late Pleistocene Des Moines lobe of Minnesota to determine how often a presumed paleo-ice stream (Des Moines Lobe and Paraná Lobe) advanced, what the dynamics of movement were (sliding versus deformation), and if climate change or sea level changes were involved.

Participants employ varying geologic research techniques, including field mapping and correlation of striated and grooved surfaces and sediments; sediment analysis; and the characterization of sediment using basic field descriptions, sedimentary petrography and geochemistry analysis, and paleoecology assessments. The availability of a wide range of methodologies allows students to tailor their research projects to their own interests while learning about other methodologies as they are utilized by fellow students. Individual projects are selected and developed by participants in either or both of the field locations.

Several approaches are used to help students identify a research project of interest to them, including an introduction to previous research and how to build upon it, questions that remain from past projects, and geologic techniques that are frequently employed. In Minnesota, students learn outcrop

description, sample collection, basic Portuguese, and are introduced to local geology through daily lectures and fieldtrips. Discussion begins about potential projects and research methodologies before heading to Brazil.

In Brazil, an inquiry approach is taken. After a short introduction to the local geology, research begins with mapping the project areas. Intentionally, students are immersed in the known and unknown of the research topic. Students quickly begin to identify research questions of their own, and fieldwork morphs from instructor-led to student-led research. Both project ownership and team building are encouraged by group discussion of projects, shared field areas, and group field trips. Students are encouraged to collaborate on research projects, either by helping in data collection or by working on different facets of the same research question.

Upon return to Minnesota, students complete analyses of data collected in the field and prepare to present their findings at the program-culminating "Friends of UMM REU" conference, which is attended by faculty and geoscientists from several institutions and organizations.

In 2013 all participants were Native-American women, and this is planned again in 2015. Native-American women are extremely underrepresented in the geosciences, and the program provides peer support, develops confidence, and introduces participants to supportive role models. Throughout the program, students participate in several seminars and discussions on the development and improvement of writing skills, resumes, and graduate-school applications, as well as discussions on issues related to scientific ethics and the challenges for women in career development. The program helps them evaluate and develop a path toward their career and life goals, making students aware of issues and identifying strategies to help them to succeed. The program also involves place-based learning with field trips to localities that are traditionally significant to Native Americans, places of historical interest, and museums or parks in both Minnesota and Brazil.

Many of the lessons learned from international research are related to accessing study sites in a culturally sensitive manner. In Brazil, safety and the language barrier require faculty and students from both institutions to work together in the field. This provides an opportunity for the U.S. students to work closely with international peers. To further encourage the international bonding, Brazilian faculty and students visit UMM to become involved in the local glacial geology research. Additional bonding activities include the international travel experience, group living in a Brazilian B&B, and Brazilian/U.S. student socializing.

Assessment of the program occurs in two stages: one focusing specifically on the Brazil fieldwork and one assessing the program overall. Prior to research in Brazil, students are asked about their background, courses taken, previous research experience, and skill sets. In Brazil, REU participants are asked to fill out pre-fieldwork surveys and are interviewed by author Bacci concerning their motivations for participation, basic understanding of geological concepts, and the expected influence of the experience on their future plans and goals.

After returning from Brazil, the UMM students were asked what skills were acquired in the fieldwork, what was learned, what additional training students feel is needed, and the influence of the experience on their future plans and goals. On the last day of the eight-week program participants are asked to complete an evaluation of the overall program. This evaluation solicits feedback (statistical and anecdotal) on the strengths and weaknesses of the program, and how the program should be modified in the future. In this process the program evaluator reviews students' field and lab techniques in both Brazil and Minnesota, discusses project selection and research plans, assesses participant field books for development of thinking and scientific maturation, evaluates completed projects, conducts exit interviews with both the participants and the teaching assistant, and reviews students' completed evaluations.

An important goal of the REU program is to encourage a summer of exciting research and learning, learning that actually continues after the program ends. A strong support network and opportunities for collegial interaction continue after participants leave UMM. A newsletter has been produced by past participants in the UMM REU program and is now administered by author Cotter and is posted on the program's website (<http://www.mrs.umn.edu/academic/geology/REU/>). Contact is maintained with most of the REU alumni via phone, e-mail, web page, or occasional letters.

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Rhetorics of Pluralism and the Almost-Hidden Research Agenda

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 Our liberal arts university hosts an annual interdisciplinary study-away program in Brussels, Belgium. During the fall semester, students intern with the European Parliament and private companies, under the direction of a Furman faculty member. Despite being a

pre-tenure faculty member invested in collaborative research and conferences, I was asked to lead the group when the program rotated to our department.

Not only was I accustomed to producing scholarly research, but our Department of Communication Studies also regularly mentors undergraduate research in the humanities. Fall semester was typically my time to encourage writing, confer with students about their research, and edit submissions of undergraduate papers for regional conferences.

Taking that model to Brussels would be difficult. I was assigned twenty students from a variety of departments across campus. Students had no particular research experience or training, and they would be busy. They would take two courses from a local university, conduct their internship for one course credit, and then have only one course left with me. The university expectation for that remaining course was to create an interdisciplinary survey of the history, politics, and culture of Europe that ties together all of the other aspects of the program. I might have considered just dropping student research completely.

Enter my hidden agenda—a research project disguised as this interdisciplinary course.

The course I devised took on twentieth-century argumentation, specifically regarding pluralism. How much diversity is required for legitimate, sustainable decision-making? Does there need to be a shared sense of community to ground competing arguments and foster good judgment? What kinds of affective bonds, of empathy, of honor, or of basic liberal tolerance allow groups to transcend incommensurable differences? The course was designed to provide some answers to those questions, covering authors who encouraged rhetorical, anti-positivist norms to overcome totalitarian regimes in twentieth-century Europe.

Given that students would juggle three college-credit courses, an internship, and personal weekend travel during the 15-week program, many took advantage of the opportunity to read over the summer. In this way, I could ensure some understanding of our course theme before we even arrived. The students read Chaim Perelman, Hannah Arendt, Michael Polanyi, and Stephen Toulmin, among others.

Those readings helped structure discussions at various sites: colonial legacies in the royal architecture of Brussels, the Great War battlefields of Ypres, the Deportation Memorial in Mechelen and the Concentration Camp of Fort Breendonk, the burnt synagogues of Antwerp, Der Philosophenweg (Philosophers' Way) in Heidelberg, the Cold War sights of Berlin, and the European Union institutions spread about the continent.

This is where the collecting began. Students captured still photographic images in these locations to “seize hold of a memory,” which were later captioned and collected in blogs and photo-journals. Students took images of colonial “souvenirs” from the Congo and wrote about how slavery and colonialism led to silences and erasures of memory. Separate state cemeteries and remembrance tactics bore witness to the inability to speak commonalities beyond nationality. And so on. I gave students only a few instructions, telling them to capture the spaces and sights without major editing, Instagram filters, or the capture of contemporary logos and sales promotions. I had also won a faculty grant to loan students iPad minis from the campus Writing & Media Lab for the semester, so technology was never a question.

The images the students captured will be helpful to me as I tell future classes about how scholars of political theory and argumentation experienced Europe in the twentieth century and about how that experience led them to reject authoritarian (even ‘enlightened’) leaders with easy answers or intolerance for social controversy. In other words, without the expensive travel, other students might now visualize how and why an elite scholarly field premised on moving from rational premises to conclusions could reject much of its own scholarly tradition and instead put hope in communities of loose reason-giving, transparent competitive debate, and audience-based (and thus merely contingent) universals.

I had to help place students in internships, meet with them regularly, and evaluate their work. To keep from overextending students or myself, I focused their attention primarily on only one theorist, Chaïm Perelman, who spent his life in Brussels. Given that the students had read his work for the course, they were asked to formulate questions for interviews with scholars of the Perelman archive and legal institute. At night, when our class met, I would share the answers to their questions I posed to scholars in interviews; we would watch retellings of Perelman’s life and how it impacted his work. Importantly, students without experience in the typical research methods and without writing time could at least serve as partners in an interdisciplinary conversation.

The trip was a major boost to my teaching and research. Seeing students shocked when we ran into unexpected connections became a real treat. The lives of the writers we had read came to life. Jewish tour guides at Mechelen and Antwerp knew the Perelmans from Brussels. Hannah Arendt’s home site was marked in Heidelberg, Margarethe von Trotta’s biopic aired just off the Grand Place in Brussels, and her face and name appeared on the street next to the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. The students were

asked to email scholars personalized interviews, and they were surprised to find the level of robust conversations they could engage in with world-renowned intellectuals, many whom they had read.

Privacy and security became major issues as the U.S. government, specifically the NSA, kept getting caught spying European allies. Employers, supervisors, and visiting European lecturers would ask hard questions about American double-speak on democracy and transparency. Students condemned Stasi guards for espionage and covert operations in their media collections. Now, when questioned, they realized they had to respond. As a counter example, Adolf Eichmann had given cool, cliché answers to pass the blame when truth could be spoken. Banal excuses or jokes were inadequate in the stormy present. By the end of our three months, they had witnessed the homes, wartime resistance sites, and graves that forbade false assurances or silence.

Did I finish anything for publication amidst all the grading and traveling? No. But my laptop has folders full of interviews aided by students, site-based photographs taken by students, and digital copies of archival material interrogated by students. Out of this material I mustered a conference presentation in Saarbrücken that is now under consideration for publication, as well as a working relationship with more than a dozen interviewed scholars from the Perelman Institute, the Jewish Museum of Belgium, and the Rhetoric and Linguistic Argumentation Group at the University of Brussels.

Future funding for summer undergraduate research will help produce a short documentary on the European basis of contemporary argumentation theory, giving in-depth exposure of this tremendous archive to an entirely new set of students. The materials on Perelman also are helping to guide me in the final round of editing and proofs of a book chapter on his concept of the Universal Audience and justice as an intergenerational rhetorical act.

If you asked the students, they would say they never signed up for a research project, nor would they be sure they completed one. Rather, by changing course requirements away from tests and quizzes and toward summer reading, course presentations, and media production, I developed a multimedia research archive for the next decade.

The students completed four surveys to evaluate the program, and we have feedback from rhetoric scholars about the usefulness of the project. In all cases, the reviews were over-the-top positive, especially from the students. Almost-hidden research agendas can pay tremendous dividends. 