

# CUR Focus

## Fifty Years of Undergraduate Research in Europe

The University of Wisconsin-River Falls Semester Abroad-Europe (SA-E) has been sending undergraduates to do research overseas for more than fifty years. The program was created in 1963 by a professor of sociology, Robert B. Bailey III. Bailey, who, received his bachelor's degree from Talladega College, had benefited from a Fulbright fellowship in 1951-2. He was so impressed with his year in England that he went on to do graduate work at two universities in Germany, completing his PhD at the University of Utrecht, the Netherlands. He returned to the United States to take an appointment at UW-River Falls in 1957.

Studying overseas had been a transformative experience for Bailey, who often commented on what it was like for him as a southern black man to move between cultures in Europe and a pre-civil-rights era United States (Bailey 1991; Soares 2001). On taking his position at UW-River Falls, he became convinced of the value of providing study-abroad experiences for all underrepresented groups, and he designed a program that would fit the specific circumstances at our institution, a regional campus that continues to draw first-generation college students from the St Croix River Valley.

Study abroad was not a new idea in 1963; Ivy League schools and other small private colleges had been sending students abroad for many years. But most of those programs drew sophisticated and relatively wealthy students who had traveled before and had studied the languages of their host countries. Most students on our campus had never studied a foreign language, and many had never traveled outside of Wisconsin. Most came from families with limited incomes for whom college expenses were a significant burden. Furthermore, the typical junior-year-abroad program sent students to foreign universities, where the American students would form their own cliques and seldom experience the cultures of their host countries in any depth. They would study liberal arts topics that helped round out their educations, but the studies seldom contributed significantly to their academic programs. That model did not fit UW-River Falls students working hard toward completing their degrees so that they could enter the workforce.

So Bailey created a new model to fit his students, one geared toward increasing, rather than limiting, participation in study abroad. SA-E follows the same model today, with very few changes (Bailey 1991), although the program was originally called Quarter Abroad, due to the academic-quarter system then in effect. The university now is think-

ing about creating a similar program in Asia. For program details, consult the program's website (<http://www.uwrf.edu/SemesterAbroadEurope/>).



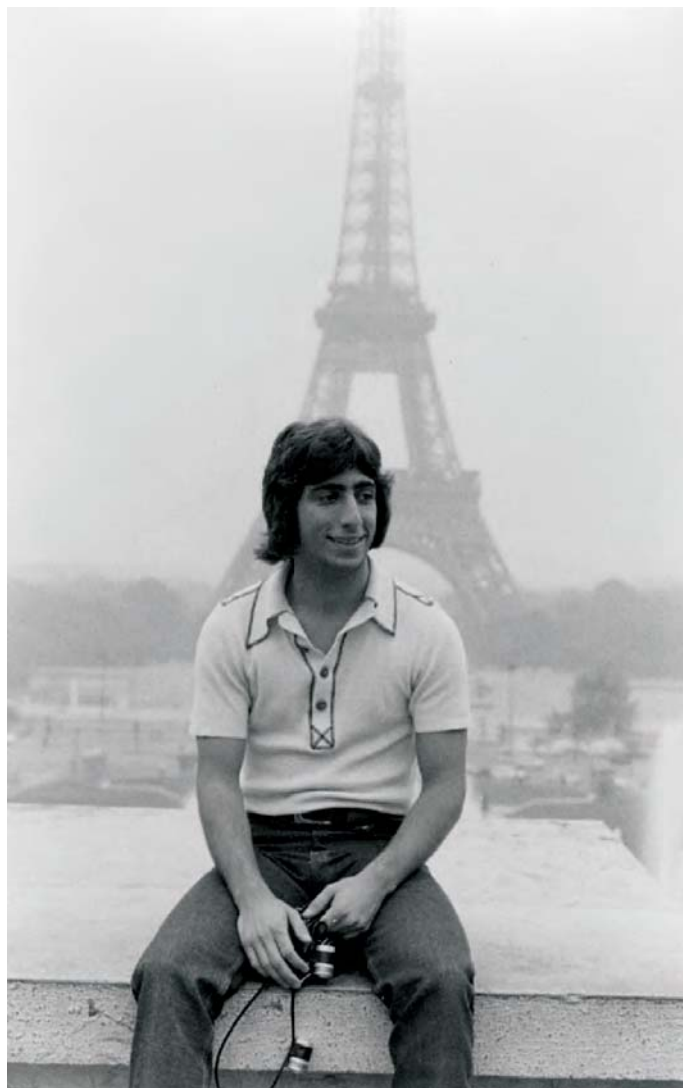
1965 Quarter Abroad students on the dock in New York city, before boarding their trans-Atlantic liner. Today, the groups fly to Europe and back. While there, they travel with Eurail passes.

### How the Program Works

A cornerstone of the program's success is its emphasis on a thorough and extended orientation for participants during the entire semester prior to their fall departure. The program begins with mandatory weekly meetings on campus during spring semester. Students learn about cultural differences between the U.S. and European countries, as well as how to manage healthcare and safety issues, and the logistics of transportation, housing, and food while traveling abroad. They also spend this orientation period preparing their research proposals. Since participants major in a wide variety of academic programs—the traditional liberal arts, humanities, and pre-professional programs; teacher education; business and economics; and the STEM disciplines, including

agricultural, animal, and earth sciences—no single international college or university could accommodate their interests. Therefore, during that spring semester, students design individualized research projects to fit their academic and career interests, working with UWRF mentoring professors in their major fields.

Undergraduates in the program must make whatever arrangements will be required to complete their research prior to traveling overseas. This includes finding work sites and sponsoring organizations, businesses, or individuals; arranging for housing, transportation, and meals; and creating a work plan. By the end of the spring semester, students have



Unidentified student from the 1970's is thrilled to be in Paris.

taken a research idea from initial concept to developed proposal; prepared a timeline, budget, objectives, and procedures; and made arrangements for all of the logistics of their travel. Research proposals must be approved by their faculty research advisers and the staff of the SA-E program.

The UW-River Falls model obviates traditional barriers to study abroad participation and success. Facility with languages other than English has been perceived as necessary in most other program models. At UW-River Falls, students who do not speak the language of the country where they plan to conduct their research are advised to design projects they can complete at work sites where English is commonly spoken, for example in laboratories in Scandinavia or the Netherlands. Many of our students report that they return from SA-E with a newfound determination to learn another language, and proceed to do so after completing the program. Cost is also an issue for UW-River Falls students, many of whom come from low- or moderate-income families. Most students find that the semester-abroad program costs approximately the same as a semester in River Falls, except for travel costs. The SA-E program yields 12 to 15 credits, so financial aid is an option for qualified students who need support for their tuition and living expenses whether they are at home or in Europe for the fall semester.

During the summer prior to their departure, students refine their research plans, nail down their arrangements for travel and accommodations, and work their summer jobs to accumulate the necessary funds for the fall term abroad. A mid-summer meeting (face to face or via Skype) allows the group leader to monitor students' levels of preparation. In late August the participants fly to Paris as a group for a week of orientation, shepherded by the program's group leader and an assistant—usually the faculty or staff person who will serve as the next SA-E group leader. They stay in a hostel (with a view of the Eiffel tower, the perfect background for selfies to email home), visit tourist sites, and learn to navigate in a country foreign to them. The group leader assigns orientation exercises: For example, a student will be told to travel alone to an assigned destination and to report back to the group on the more surprising aspects of the experience.

After their week in Paris, students disperse to research sites throughout Europe. The group leader travels from site to site to check on students' progress, ease difficulties, and counsel the homesick. At each location, the leader spends one or two days visiting work sites, meeting sponsors, and walking with the students, who are encouraged to become "temporary Europeans" and show the program leader what they have learned about the history, culture, and traditions of their chosen location. All participants must maintain weekly email contact with the group leader, usually on



Anna Mallory, geology, studying the geomorphology of the Venice lagoon, 2013.



Abigail Faul (on the left), animal science, studying dolphins in Slovenia, 2013.

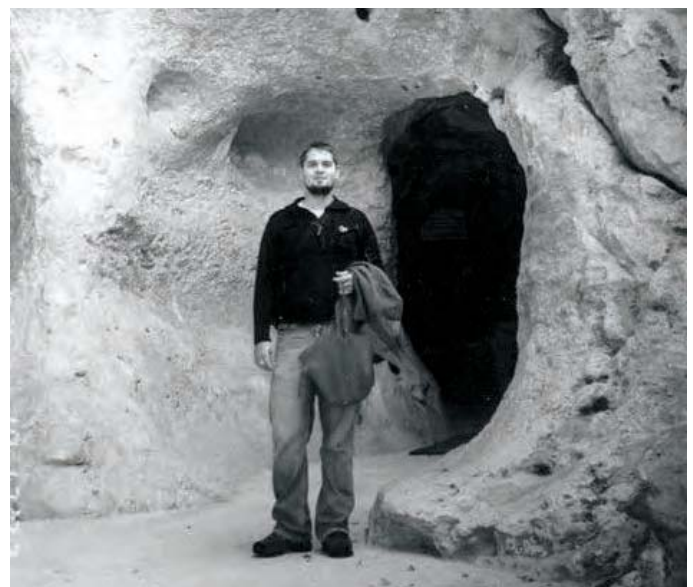
a designated day, to summarize progress on their research and report any difficulties. This helps to ensure everyone's safety as well as to maintain progress with research agendas. In early November the group reconvenes for three days in a low-cost family resort on the Italian Riviera—accessible from throughout Europe and relatively inexpensive to reach with student Eurail passes. Then, after 10 weeks of individualized, intensive research experiences, the students travel on their own for a month. Some go skiing, some continue their research, some are joined by family or friends. All are urged to begin writing their research reports, and most do. In mid-December, they meet in Paris and fly home.

In order to earn 12 credits, students must write two 20-page, multi-disciplinary papers addressing a range of socio-cultural and historical contexts for their European research; in addition, they each write substantial 40 to 50 page term papers that report on their specific research objectives, methods, and outcomes. The two shorter papers, which earn three credits each and fulfill two general education requirements,

are due in February; the research paper, worth six credits, is due on the first Friday after the March spring break. Some students arrange for an additional three-credit independent study project, either related to or independent of their major project.

Students' research projects have been as varied as their interests. Here is a sample of titles and work sites:

- "The Planning and Development of the Kop Van Zuid" (1984, Rotterdam)
- "Django Reinhardt and Gypsy Jazz" (1987, Paris)
- "Machismo: Cultural Differences in Male Heterosexual Advances within Italy" (1989, Italy)
- "Evaluation, Education, and Rehabilitation of Adults and Children with Hearing Impairment in the Netherlands" (1990, Netherlands)
- "Comparison of French and American Editorial Coverage of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade" (1991, France)
- "Animal to Art Felting in Scotland" (1992, Scotland)
- "Quality Assurance Standards in a French Cheese Factory" (1995, France)
- "Development and History of pravda.ru" (1998, Moscow)
- "Le Système Éducatif Français" (1999, France)



Matthew Fischer, art, studying the cave paintings of Southern France, 2002.

- “Between ‘Iraq’ and a Hard Place: The Ongoing Struggle of Germany’s Children of the Crescent Moon as Seen through the Eyes of University Students” (2003, Germany)
- “Comparative Studies of Management Models at Postojna Jama and Skocjanske Jame” (2003, Slovenia)
- “Investigating Equine Streptococcal Pathogens” (2007, Great Britain)
- “Employment and Vocational Rehabilitation: The US and Great Britain” (2009, Great Britain)

The quality of the research papers also varies. Some are sterling, some are pedestrian; some have led to academic careers; others have helped students build skills in research, thinking, and writing that they have used in non-academic careers. More than a few students have learned that the paths they had charted for themselves were not well-suited to their talents and interests. In short, the SA-E research projects are similar to undergraduate research projects everywhere, except for where they take place.

## SA-E Results

During its fifty years of operation, the program has sent 1,038 students to Europe. Groups typically have 15 to 20 students, although we have sent groups as small as eight and as large as 39. All students have returned from Europe relatively unscathed; although three or four came home early due to illness or other emergencies, the overwhelming majority were able to see their projects through to the end, overcoming in the process a variety of personal and/or scholarly difficulties relating to travel, housing, illness, data collection, research sites, relationships, and so on.

Past group leaders tell stories of students who overcame more significant challenges. For instance, a student from the UW-River Falls equine program had arranged to study horse-training techniques at a riding academy in Ireland, but on arrival she discovered her host and hostess embroiled in a vicious marital dispute. All participants are encouraged to have a “Plan B” ready just in case, and this student was able to implement hers, re-orienting her project to the traditions and techniques of fox-hunting in England. In the end, she had a rewarding and successful experience in England, and she learned as much about adaptability and problem-solving as she did about fox-hunting.

A few years ago, three students sharing an apartment in Barcelona came home from dinner on their second night in the city to discover the door kicked in and cameras, computers, etc., missing. They had apparently just missed the burglar and were extremely shaken. They called the group

leader, who immediately flew to Barcelona and spent three days with them. The landlord installed a much stronger door and lock, and neighbors were very helpful. The three students showed resilience by deciding to stay, and all successfully completed their projects.

Perhaps the most common challenge involves overcoming the everyday experience of culture shock. One recent student commented: “I wish I could have been more immediately motivated and ambitious to move about and sightsee on my own; at first, I spent too much time reading in my hotel. It was hard for me to push myself out of my comfort zone. I know now what I can do and I have the confidence to do it.”

Successes far outweigh the challenges. For instance, a student in one of the program’s first cohorts did her research in England, but traveled in Germany, Scandinavia, and Switzerland during her final weeks. She wrote of the experience:

“The program was life-altering in many ways. It made me infinitely curious about the world, about languages, and it awakened in me a spirit of adventure that led me back to Europe with a one-way ticket after graduation. [It] explains my interest and then career in foreign languages (German). As I traveled through Europe, I was taken aback by the multilingualism of its people as I met them in trains and youth hostels. Of course, I spoke only English. I promised myself at that point that I would learn a second language to the point of fluency. That it was German was determined by what I call historical accident, that is, Germany was the place I found work upon graduation. I set about achieving my language goal, and four years later, came home to attend graduate school at the University of Wisconsin.”

Today, she is a professor of German at the University of New Hampshire. The research project was important to her “... in the sense that it involved sustained study of a topic, an experiential component, and a written thesis that approached graduate work in its complexity and length.” She encourages her own students to study abroad, and designed and directs a five-week summer experience required of all German majors. Its participants take language and culture classes, and complete a small research project that they present to the group during the final week of the program. She commented: “They return to us so much more sophisticated and confident that I think it is reasonable to aim for study abroad for all students.”

A participant in SA-E during the 90’s affirms that it was a life-changing experience and illustrates that the student population at UW-River Falls had not changed appreciably from the program’s inception in 1963:

“I had never been on a plane before, and only out of

Wisconsin on a bus trip with my high school band. I'd only been to museums on grade school field trips, and rarely been to Minneapolis [The city closest to River Falls, all of 30 miles away.]. The trip opened up the world to me in countless ways. The semester of planning prior to the trip taught me valuable travel skills that I take with me today. I learned to immerse myself in the local culture, being respectful and open to different ways of life. I did the majority of the trip solo, staying in youth hostels and had only one pre-arranged, brief two-day stay with a family friend. I learned self-reliance, confidence, and the ability to persevere through difficult and sometimes lonely situations."

Even today, a number of UW-River Falls students have rarely, if ever, traveled by air, and it is not uncommon to meet students who have spent their lives in the St. Croix River Valley area where the university is located. For the undergraduate above, as for so many of the SA-E participants, the opportunity to travel and pursue independent research provided the best of both worlds. As one said:

"The research ... led me to so many different locations—large, small, rural, urban. I did a survey of the different research projects [addressing] forest decline (at one point referred to as acid rain), visiting universities throughout eastern and western Germany. I met with professors and students, visited their research sites, toured their facilities to observe the data being collected and the equipment used, discussed the hypotheses being tested, and the results/findings."

By her account, it is the combined effect of both these high-impact practices, study abroad and undergraduate research, that prepared her for the workforce after her graduation. Thus, she reports that although she worked in the tree-nursery industry for a short time, "I've since worked in a number of fields—from the medical profession to finance to higher education. The experience of traveling to many places, interviewing a range of professionals, and collecting information and knowledge helped to build the skills required to perform work duties throughout my diverse employment history.

Indeed, many past SA-E participants tell similar stories: The travel was immediately significant, while the research projects built skills that turned out to be crucial later in their lives. One program graduate commented:

"Study Abroad-Europe has had a major impact on my life. After traveling around Europe for a semester I have become a more outgoing person and have become more open to trying new things, including food and experiences. Meeting people from all over the world has helped me to find ways to talk with people and to better appreciate the differences in all of us. I am currently working in the IT field, which is what I did my research on. SA-E helped me prepare in better

understanding the history and direction of IT. I continue to keep updated on how various aspects of IT affect those that use it. ... After doing the research for my project as well as writing the paper, I became better at researching and writing. I frequently communicate through written media and have written a few proposals and analyses on topics related to my job. I also try to ensure that my decisions are data driven, and I use data to help others make informed decisions."

Another student learned that some topics are difficult to research, and perhaps even dangerous. And yet even fraught research topics lead to global perspectives and cultural understandings that can last a lifetime:

"Semester Abroad was the most valuable experience of my college career. I went to Europe in my second year, which meant I was a bit younger than the other participants. I had limited experience of the world outside of the Midwest. Traveling put my life at home into a much larger perspective. Issues I had encountered at home became smaller because of this new perspective. ... The topic of my research paper was the conflict in Northern Ireland. I was a political science major. This was at a time when there were still attacks occurring. People were not receptive to open conversation about their experiences related to the conflict. It also was probably dangerous. It was an interesting topic to think about from a classroom in Wisconsin, but another thing to walk around Belfast streets taking photos of barricaded police stations and political graffiti with people watching me and wondering what I was doing. In retrospect I should have chosen a less emotionally charged and dangerous subject."

Today, the program accepts only juniors and seniors, with rare exceptions. Still, the most challenged research projects can produce surprisingly positive, if occasionally tangential, outcomes. The participant quoted above went on to say:

"In Europe, I met a fellow who was a computer scientist. This was 1995 and the Internet was new. He was able to do some very interesting things with computers that I hadn't been aware of before. I was fascinated by this fellow, and I ended up choosing a second major of computer science shortly after this trip in part because of meeting him."

Another recent participant told us that her intensive study of an Italian volcano led her, on her return to the United States, to alter her undergraduate program, and intensify her preparations for graduate school. Yet several others reported that they found undergraduate life difficult after returning. One said:

"In some regards I felt like I became a worse student when I returned to the USA; transitioning back into normal life, normal classroom behaviors, expectations, and skills—that was very challenging. ... On the other hand I was ready to

graduate and do things that counted toward something that people were going to use, and that influenced or affected meaningful decisions. That meant much more to me than doing assignments that just one professor reads. It's not all about grades. It's about finding your passion."

Other researchers in SA-E commented on their improved academic skills. Said a student from the 2011 cohort: "My research and writing skills improved dramatically, and due to my preparations during my travels, I was able to complete a 54-page paper. I learned how to dig and find those obscure texts, and craft and argue my positions efficiently and effectively. These skills have proved indispensable to my academic career."

### Administrative Details

The Semester Abroad-Europe program was created by Professor Robert Bailey based on his passion for study abroad, and he continued to direct it for thirty years. It has been maintained by a succession of faculty and staff who have shared Bailey's passion. Gradually, the university created an administrative structure that sustains the program. Participating students pay tuition for 12 to 15 credits. Those funds are captured by the program and support administrative costs: replacement instructors and travel costs for the group leader and assistant, some clerical assistance, and marketing costs. Students pay for their own travel, personal ex-

penses, housing, and food—just as they would if they were on campus. The total cost of Fall semester participation in SA-E runs between \$10,000 to \$13,000, depending on the type of European housing the student chooses (hostels are the most affordable, and the most popular); the extent and location of travel; the research project's location (big cities and Scandinavian locations are generally more expensive than rural sites and countries in southern Europe); eating and drinking choices; and so on. By comparison, for Wisconsin residents who choose to live on the UW-River Falls campus, the fall 2014 total cost of attendance (COA) is \$9,572; for Wisconsin residents who choose to live off campus, the total semester COA is \$10,147. Minnesota residents, who comprise approximately 45 percent of our undergraduate enrollments, pay slightly more in all categories for their total cost of attendance. The net result: Most students find that participating in SA-E costs little more than living on campus for a semester. And since they are still full-time students at UW-River Falls, financial aid applies to the SA-E costs.

### Conclusions

What conclusions can we draw from this fifty-year history and the small sample of participants we interviewed? As readers of the *CUR Quarterly* know, undergraduate research provides an extremely powerful active learning experience. Conducting undergraduate research while abroad intensifies




The 2010 group shortly after arrival in Paris, presented by group leader Lynn Jermal.

the experience and amplifies the effect. Student after student reports that SA-E was a life-changing experience.

In addition, we have learned that:

- Traveling in Europe on their own is transformative for many students.
- Planning the research project, gathering data on-site, and presenting their work upon return helps students develop competencies in critical thinking, organization and time management, and public speaking. Participants also report increased confidence in their decision-making abilities and a productive persistence that allows them to continue their work in the face of adversity.
- The content of the research project is less important than its execution. Students seldom have made the topics of their projects their life's work, although many have found their eventual vocations through their SA-E experience.
- Students who participated early in their college careers learned less from their research experiences than juniors and seniors who were farther along in their academic programs—although the sophomores we interviewed emphasized that they gained enormously from the experience.
- Stuff happens. Travel or housing plans go awry, research sites become unavailable, research plans are too ambitious, or people get sick. But learning to handle the unplanned or unanticipated is one of the primary benefits of doing research abroad.
- Most study-abroad programs are expensive for students and the colleges or universities that offer them. But the SA-E program demonstrates that it is possible to build an affordable and sustainable program based on the passion of a few faculty and staff when that passion is bolstered by an administration that is committed to providing significant learning experiences for its students.

Robert B. Bailey III designed the SA-E program to be inclusive. He perceived and understood the relationship between undergraduate research conducted abroad, workforce-skills development, and subsequent economic opportunities. Thus, he stressed that “this opportunity [SA-E] must not be linked only to the elite, but must be made available to all students” (Bailey 1991). He wanted to maximize participation in European study abroad by addressing perceived language and economic barriers, and in so doing, he gave UW-River Falls undergraduates the dual benefit of hands-on research experiences and greater cultural awareness. The program continues to do an exemplary job of opening opportunities for its participants, many of whom are first-generation and/or lower-income college students. 

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