

# Identifying and Overcoming Barriers to Study Away Courses At A Regional Public University

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## **Abstract**

It is widely recognized that study away (i.e., off-campus) courses enrich the educational experience of undergraduate students. These courses have been shown to increase students' personal growth and intercultural competency, while providing hands-on exploration of the natural and cultural history of other regions and countries. Study away courses are an excellent example of how Missouri Western State University fulfills its mission as the applied learning institution for the state of Missouri. Missouri Western State University is an open-enrollment regional university with a large proportion of economically challenged students, many of whom are also first-generation college students. This situation presents many potential barriers to student participation in, and faculty coordination of, these courses. These challenges include course fees, trip logistics, institutional support, and perceptions of study-away courses. In this paper, we discuss how we have approached these challenges in one domestic and three international study away courses focused on biology and geology.

## Introduction

Both study abroad courses and study away courses, which apply the principles and pedagogy of international study abroad programs to domestic programs (Sobania & Braskamp, 2009), are high-impact applied learning opportunities for undergraduates that can broaden students' perspectives and enrich their college experience. Although study abroad programs are relatively common at many universities, study away courses to domestic destinations are a valuable alternative. Students who participate in domestic study away courses can experience many of the benefits of an international study abroad course, and these programs can be more affordable and logistically more feasible than courses that require international travel (Hope, 2008; Sobania & Braskamp, 2009; Meyers & Arnold, 2016). For example, Lane et al. reported that the redesign of a proposed study abroad course to South Africa to instead travel to a domestic destination led to substantially higher enrollment while still addressing the course learning outcomes (Lane et al., 2017). For the remainder of this article, we will use the term "study away" to refer to both domestic and international courses.

In several studies across multiple disciplines, students reported increases in functional and interpersonal skills, understanding of global relationships and interdependence, and cultural sensitivity after completing a study away course, including both domestic and international programs (Cisneros-Donahue et al., 2012; Engberg, 2013; Lane et al, 2017; Zimmermann et al., 2021). This kind of cultural competency is a necessary skill in many careers. For example, health care providers must meet the health care needs of patients from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Nursing students who participated in a domestic study away program reported an increase in empathy towards patients from different ethnic and socioeconomic groups, as well as a greater understanding of disparities in the healthcare system (Nicely & Stricklin, 2017). Study abroad courses in health care increased the effectiveness of nursing student communication and improved patient care (Carpenter & Garcia, 2012). While these studies focused specifically on nursing students, cultural competency and communication skills are important for all undergraduate majors and are among the basic competencies in the Missouri state undergraduate general studies curriculum, underscoring their importance in undergraduate education.

During study away programs, students have to go beyond the classroom model of learning, applying content knowledge and skills in new contexts. This increases students' understanding of course content (Taylor & Shore, 2019) and their ability to properly use skills learned in class (Delmas, 2021). Students who participate in study abroad programs have increased graduation rates, higher enrollment rates and higher cumulative GPAs subsequent to their trip away (Ingraham & Peterson, 2004; Xu et al., 2013). Despite the benefits of study away courses for students, these courses are often limited due to a variety of significant intrinsic and extrinsic challenges (Shinbrot et al., 2022). In the 2021-2022 academic year, only 5.9% of US undergraduates participated in a

study abroad program. Only 15.8% participated in short-term courses, defined as being less than five weeks duration (IIE, 2023).

The Missouri Western State University (MWSU) Biology Department has a long (30+ year) history of offering short-term study away courses. Recent nine-day trips have traveled to Arizona (2020), Costa Rica (2021 and 2019), and Belize (2024). These trips have all focused on experiential learning about local ecosystems and culture, and some trips have also included a focus on hands-on ecology research projects (Table 1). Our study away courses have no prerequisites and we do not limit these experiences to Biology majors.

Therefore, while we present content (e.g., coral reef fishes we expect to see in Belize) and expect the students to learn about the destinations before, during and after the trip, this is typically not our emphasis. We want to expose students to different habitats, ecosystems, climates, peoples, and cultures. By doing so, we hope they will be more well-rounded and globally aware citizens.

Students maintain a daily trip journal recording their activities, thoughts, and reactions to the day's events. Often these trips are followed by a meeting - open to other faculty and students and participants' friends and family - in which students present Powerpoint "travelogues" of each day of the trip, as well as results of their research projects (when applicable). This allows the students to synthesize their experiences from the trip and engage in self-reflection.

Destination	Transportation	Lodging	Trip focus	Activities
Arizona	domestic flights, rented van	hotels	exploration of biology, geology, culture	Visits to Grand Canyon, Painted Desert, Petrified Forest and Saguaro National Parks, Red Rocks and Homolovi State Parks, Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum
Costa Rica	international flights, bus provided by tour company	field station, hotels	exploration of biology and culture; independent research projects	Visit to, and 2-day research projects at, La Selva Biological Station; visits to Cahuita (coastal town) and San Jose (capital city), including the Gold Museum
Belize	international flights, domestic flights in Belize, bus provided by tour company	field station, hotels	exploration of biology and culture	4 days of snorkeling on Belize Barrier Reef from Belize TREC; visits to Belize Zoo, Xunantunich, and Cahal Pech (Mayan ruins)

**Table 1.** Summary of recent MWSU study away trips (2019-2024)

In this paper, we draw on our experiences in leading study away courses to briefly explore three major challenges to conducting study away courses. We also provide suggestions for minimizing or overcoming these challenges.

### **Challenges to a Regional Public University STEM Study Away Program**

#### *Financial challenges*

Cost is broadly noted as a major barrier to student participation in study away programs nationwide (Brown et al., 2016; Lingo, 2019). MWSU is an open-access regional university that serves many financially challenged students, and funding an elective study away trip is often difficult for students. The authors begin to advertise their study away courses, including the estimated cost, at least a year in advance so students have time to plan financially. Faculty hold multiple informational sessions the semester prior to the program. These meetings often include a guest from the Financial Aid Office or the office which runs the study away program to help answer students' questions about payment.

When departments are in charge of making arrangements for their trips, deposits required prior to payment of student course fees can strain departmental

budgets and discourage study away course offerings. One solution is to have a study away “slush fund” built up using a percentage of the funds collected during previous study away trips. This can be used to make deposits for future trips, and repaid out of student fees. There have been multiple substantial changes to the MWSU study away program structure since 2020. This has created confusion as to when and how student course fees were assessed, which has led to some students dropping courses early in the term. Clarifying costs, payment structure, and how the payments will appear on a student’s tuition bill early and often is very important to student recruitment and retention.

### *Logistical challenges*

Direct support and participation by faculty and staff is highly important in a successful study away program. Only 8.2% of US undergraduate study away students in academic year 2021-2022 were from the physical or life sciences (IIE, 2023). Niehaus & Inkelas (2016) found that STEM majors’ intent to study abroad waned significantly between freshman and sophomore years, with the greatest change being found within the biological sciences. This discrepancy is likely due to STEM students’ more structured schedule of courses as well as preparation for standardized exams, such as the MCAT, among other factors (Desoff 2006, Wainwright et al. 2009, Niehaus & Inkelas 2016). This low rate of STEM participation has been mitigated in some cases by having an office dedicated to accommodating students from STEM programs in study abroad programs (Kim & Lawrence, 2021). While no such office exists at MWSU, the Biology Department has faculty who are dedicated to bringing students into the study away program. Biology faculty and staff provide most of the organization, promotion, and advising about scheduling and course planning.

For the three most recently completed study away courses, planning and coordination were primarily done by the Biology Department. The instructors and administrative assistant were in charge of arranging lodging, activities, food and transportation for all participants; in the case of the international trips, a travel agent and in-country tour operator were also involved. This department-based format significantly increased the amount of work for instructors planning the course, both during and before the semester in which the class took place. Some instructors could find this extra work, on top of already-heavy course loads, to be discouraging. Having access to a capable and well-organized study away office has helped greatly. For institutions lacking such an office, having a department template for trip design (see Appendix for the authors’ trip design template) would be extremely useful, along with a clear understanding of the time and effort required for faculty to plan and lead a trip.

During the time in which the authors have created and run study away courses, the university study away program has had multiple directors, shifted to different offices within the university, and for a time had no central leadership. While this in no way reflected active discouragement, the lack of consistent structure resulted in confusion and miscommunication between faculty, staff and administration during the planning and execution phases of our study away

courses. We have found that, especially with the turnover and instability in study away program administration, it is best to have a core group of experienced instructors who have successfully taught study away courses available not only to lead future courses, but also to mentor and train other faculty. These “experienced” instructors not only have run multiple study away trips/courses, but have also already overcome some of the inherent challenges and problems encountered along the way. They are also helpful for informing new staff and administrators of previous policies and procedures.

### *Perceptions of study away courses*

An additional common factor found as a reason for non-participation in study away courses is student engagement in non-academic activities - sports, clubs, student government, etc. (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2015; Brown et al., 2016; Kim & Lawrence, 2021). This creates a sense of “missing out” or an “effort” barrier, wherein students are worried that a study away opportunity will cause them to miss out on valuable on-campus experiences or activities, or create an excess workload for them upon return. This barrier can be partially resolved by moving the dates of the study away trip to the period over winter break or between the spring and summer semesters, when no classes are taking place and clubs and teams may not be meeting or practicing. The authors have also found it difficult to generate student interest in domestic trips, in part because students have harbored an expectation of visiting a foreign country during any kind of study away program. For example, some students who did not sign up for a proposed study away trip to the Pacific Northwest said part of their decision was due to the fact that the trip did not include a visit to Canada.

One of the ways to combat these student concerns is to give students opportunities to have them addressed directly by the course instructors. The authors hold multiple informational meetings about a trip in the semester prior to the scheduled course to advertise and describe the course activities and to answer student questions in person. We are also planning to add visits to student organizations to reach more potential participants. During these meetings, instructors use their own experiences on these trips as well as quotes from past students to inspire future students to participate in study away courses. We emphasize to students how these can be once-in-a-lifetime experiences. Personal experiences can be powerful evidence. We often employ quotes or stories told by past student participants, and stories from the instructors themselves. As an example, one of the authors tells potential students how it felt the first time he, as a Nebraska boy, was swimming on a coral reef in Belize and saw a pod of squid swim up and change colors and patterns multiple times in a few seconds, which felt like being in a Jacques Cousteau documentary. Students are drawn in by the personal and dramatic stories we can tell about our own experiences.

We have also used multiple methods to summarize and publicize participant activities during and after a study away trip. Early trips often had a “Field Natural History Public Night” scheduled after the group returned to campus. The

instructor would request photos from trip participants and prepare an overview that was given to the public (parents, classmates, friends, and the academic community). Occasionally, prior to the trip, a schedule was prepared and each student was placed on a team that was responsible for documenting one particular day of the trip activities. During the public presentation, teams were given ten minutes to summarize their day's activities. More recently, blogs have been created and daily posts - including photos, a brief narrative, and "quotes of the day" - are uploaded by students during the trip. This innovative process has allowed non-trip participants to vicariously experience the trip in real time.

### **Conclusion**

Having a consistent and cohesive group of study away instructors within the Biology Department is one of the most important aspects of our program. It provides a form of institutional memory that benefits future instructors, as well as staff and administration. It is important to clearly communicate to prospective students all costs of the course, and how and when charges will appear on student accounts. Providing information about trip experiences via informational meetings, public post-trip presentations, and dissemination of blog links can help to attract student interest as well to counter inaccurate perceptions of study away trips. Despite the challenges involved in planning and executing study away trips, these courses are vitally important opportunities for students and are often among the most significant parts of our students' college experience.