
Creating and Facilitating a Successful Study Away Program

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Introduction

When reflecting upon the most enjoyable experiences I have shared with my students as a library educator, I think of my time facilitating a study away program. I have now been leading a trip to either Puerto Rico or Athens Greece each summer for several years. These trips took careful planning and consideration for quite a while before any students ever traveled. This program is now the highlight of many of my student's graduate school experiences. Lessons learned can be transferable to other LIS programs to build a similar experience for other groups of students.

If planning a study away experience, thoughtful attention should be paid to situating the experience into a program's plan of study. This ensures that the trip is meaningful to the students as well as purposeful for their overall educational goals. One of the things I had to

consider when first considering a study away program was how it would fit in with my students' plan of study. Our program is 100% online and taught asynchronously. Many of our students are nontraditional, they are working professionals who fit graduate school around the demands of other obligations. Many are already working in libraries. Those who are pursuing school librarianship are oftentimes classroom teachers adding on an endorsement in school librarianship. However, it is important to our program to embed authentic practice within our coursework. To accomplish this, we require an internship for all our students. Study away is one way to satisfy the internship requirement presented as a natural alignment to meet our program's goals. I would encourage other programs considering study away to consider how they may similarly align a study trip to their own programmatic goals. Not only does this allow for buy-in with students, but it also helps to create demand for the study away program among your own student population.

In our student body, because the students are non-traditional, many cannot easily take an entire semester to experience an internship experience. Therefore, the study away opportunity allows students to have the experience of in-depth experiential work while also taking a break from their otherwise very busy lives. It allows them to engage with the knowledge and skills they have been learning in course work, that they have been building theory behind foundational growth, and then put this into practice.

Setting up the Program

Establishing a study away program begins well before the trip starts. Our program focuses on the cultural aspects of traveling to another location but also the internship work of being and working in a library setting for several weeks. The study away experience for our program combined with our internship provides a rich and robust experience where students are doing the work of what somebody in that environment might do, as well as learning about the community that they might be serving while there. Because of this, it was important to me that we had some meaningful professional opportunities. We weren't just going to find sites and do some cultural visits, but we had to do that meaningful work in the library that an internship would provide. Therefore, initially I explored how to put this into practice, how to take an in-depth, hands-on experience and place it in a culturally different environment.

Setting up that work component was a strong consideration that took several meetings with host librarians to establish what the interns may do once they are on site. I work with the Office of Study Abroad at my university to initiate conversations with university librarians on location. We first established that there are professional librarians on site, and they are able and willing to mentor interns. Next, the librarians and I had a few back-and-forth discussions about the types of work my students are prepared to engage in and the types of tasks the librarians may have available at the host site. This all must be carefully negotiated to ensure that the students participate in more than just observational experiences. The student interns will be on site from about 8:00AM - 5:00 PM everyday Monday through Friday during our visit and they will participate in authentic meaningful tasks in the information setting at the site each day. This all takes a lot of pre-planning and negotiation on my part to find a site that is appropriate for that type of work.

In addition to the internship, I help coordinate the logistics of the trip as well. Things like where the group will be housed and negotiating amenities in the area to include access to laundry facilities, grocery stores, plentiful food supplies, and access to public transportation around the area. Are all considered. Additional logistical and cultural considerations such as the cultural experiences we might explore, museums or local attractions and beaches are all discussed. A lot of the logistical considerations and transportation are all packaged together, discussed between myself and the hosting librarians or with my office of Study Abroad, to make sure that we have as much of the trip planned before arriving as possible. The more that is planned prior to arrival, the better. Pre-planning leaves little uncertainty, which is when there is a greater chance for something to go wrong when traveling with a large group. Pre-planning also allows me to present a comprehensive itinerary to my students. Many of my students have not previously traveled out of the country, some of them not out of their home state, at all. Therefore, prior planning causes less anxiety for the students if they know what to plan for and what to anticipate.

Because our program meets the needs of our program's objectives and the plan of study for our students we meet the program capacity each year. We have not needed to open our trip up to students outside our program. However, since I am only marketing to my own students, I promote the trip to our own student population each year. I advertise where we are going, what to anticipate in terms of cost, what the dates of the trip are and the application process. So, for a summer trip, I conduct information sessions in September of the previous year, letting

students know how they become eligible, what course work is required prior to going, what they might expect, how they should apply, etc. Then, I continue to market the program all the way through until the deadline for signing up, which is in March of the year of the trip. After March, I have a finalized roster of students.

The final stages of planning take place in early summer. I hold online meetings with the students. I try to review some packing strategies for items they might want to consider bringing on the trip such as universal power plugs (if we are traveling internationally) or travel backpacks. I also share a few pictures from previous trips to generate excitement and engage the students in some interaction, so they get to know one another.

Common Challenges Associated with Study Away Programs

As exciting as study abroad is, there are always challenges whenever a large group travels together. Some of the challenges were not surprising and were issues that seemed to be traditional considerations that may be present in any given study away experience. Other challenges were more unique due to the internship nature of our experience.

Some of the common challenges I have faced while on a study away trip are illness and injury. All of my trips have occurred in the past four years, or post-covid. Therefore, each trip has had at least one instance of a student having Covid-19 while on the trip. This is unfortunate, but unforeseeable. The student in question had to quarantine and missed much of the trip. But this was not something that could have been planned for or prevented. I also had a student who was injured and required emergency surgery while on a study away trip. Again, while this was extremely unfortunate, this could not be anticipated. I was fortunate enough to have had fantastic support both in the country and back in the States and the student received excellent care.

Other challenges have required prior consideration. There are sometimes language considerations because the host country we are arriving in has a native language other than English. Language was a consideration for our trips to Puerto Rico, which is a native Spanish speaking area, as well as Athens Greece, which is a Greek speaking area. Materials in those libraries are not necessarily presented in English. Additionally, the librarians in these countries speak English as a second language. Because of this, some of the tasks have to be considered: can my students read the materials? Can they engage in the library work at an appropriate

level? There is no language requirement for my students to participate in the trip. Therefore, I have to ensure that the tasks are appropriate for their language proficiency. Not only do they have to be able to do the work and do the work in the appropriate language, but the librarians must be able to communicate with my students, to be able to mentor them appropriately, as well as within the confines of those language barriers.

A second major challenge to consider is affordability. Because of the composition of my student population, many are paying their way through graduate school, either out of pocket or through the use of federal financial aid. They are working professionals, with established families. They want to know what the anticipated costs for the program are and I try to be very mindful of their situation and keep the anticipated costs to a minimum. Whenever I can allow my students to use any loyalty programs like airline rewards, etc. to offset some of the costs, I try to allow for that. If they can pay for meals out of pocket versus having a set fee for meals together, we opt for that. That way students can anticipate how much they are willing or able to spend on their own self support. These measures keep the cost down a little and everybody gets to be at a price point that feels a little more comfortable to them. These are some of the considerations that help mitigate our challenges. It takes a little bit more effort to make sure the majority of my students who want to take advantage of the study away opportunity are able.

Benefits to a Study Away Experience

Likewise, the program lends itself to some fantastic benefits. Study away exposes my students to a wonderful array of library settings and some of the different professional library practices they wouldn't necessarily see in their home libraries. This is one benefit that students share about after the trip most often. They state how they were exposed to different practices, different ways of doing things, and how they participated in a richer conversation between the host librarian and the student librarians that were on the trip. Students felt they got to see how different libraries and different library systems serve their communities in a unique way.

The study away opportunity presents a rich opportunity for the students in their career trajectory. Students who have participated in the experience discuss how the study away program enriched their path to a career in libraries in a meaningful, purposeful way. Maybe they are now looking at a community focused library path. It is very immersive. They participate in



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rich cultural experiences, seeing how the library becomes a piece of the entire community in a way that is not typical for others that do an internship in their home community.

One additional way that the experience has demonstrated a surprise benefit is the impact to the hosting librarians. Many times, the host librarians themselves report they perceive the interns to be a source of professional development. The librarians serve as mentors and leaders in a way that they have not had the opportunity to engage previously in their practice. They are learning new trends and new ways of thinking that have been infused into their own practice from the interns. They are learning and gaining new foundational skills brought in through the future trends and ideas of the interns and they are having conversations in a different and more guided way than they have had recently in their own setting. They see the interns as revitalizing some of their own practices. This newfound appreciation has been nice to hear from the host libraries -that the interns were not only coming in and taking from them, but that they were also giving a little something back.

Student Experiences

- Cataloging
- Preservation
- Weeding and Collection Development
- Instruction

The students who have participated in the study away trips have had a variety of experiences. Cataloging continues to be a consistent need. Though many of the students enter into the internship with the notion that they do not have the desire to do any cataloging, many have found this to be a new skill. At the onset of their time in the placement cataloging was a frightening option. Most interns had never done any original cataloging, and that is what they are often faced with, a lot more original cataloging than the more traditional copy cataloging that is done in some of the US sites. But the students found a passion for this cataloging. This is due in part to the fact that they are working with some original, unique resources and they are finding that they love diving in and exploring some of these resources in an investigative way.

Students have experienced rare material preservation. Some of the sites that we have visited, some of the opportunities that we have had, housed materials that are very rare. These materials need some attention and preservation, or they may not be sustainable much longer.



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The students are investigating new types of exploration for how to preserve the rich cultural heritage that exists in some of these materials. Unfortunately, what we have found is that there is not enough staff in some of these sites to really do the type of preservation required quickly enough to maintain and preserve some of the materials. So, the students are giving back a nice service to help along some of that work.

There is always weeding and collection development work to be done at the sites. The collection development process has been informative; everything from shelf reading then taking away materials that perhaps have outlived some of their usefulness. Next is suggesting new materials that might be more relevant to the collection at hand. Along with these tasks include tasks such as coding and marking resources with appropriate labels so materials are shelf ready for patrons and staff.

Many of our students, especially those that are looking towards a school library position, look towards instructional tasks. Many of our sites have an academic library focus, and they are so grateful to some of our students that are building online resources and are curating resources that are instructionally based. Students have created guides and instructional resources that will help learner populations and faculty. The library professionals are thankful to have an English language perspective in these instructional materials.

But it's not all work when our students are there. They are also investing in the cultural experience as well. All of the students participate in some cultural exchanges that are fun, and showcase some of the wonderful opportunities that the host countries have. We have had Greek dance lessons and traditional Salsa lessons down in Puerto Rico. We have learned how to make some traditional foods in both of the countries, which has been delicious and a lot of fun. We go sightseeing together, often with a guide from the host country. We also have opportunities to explore the outdoors in each location such as kayaking in the bioluminescent bays, exploring the beautiful beaches and coastlines of Greece, many, many museum visits and art exchanges and open-air concerts, and just a wealth of experiences. Mostly the students select what they would like to do based on their own areas of interest. Sometimes we go as a whole group and sometimes the students break off into smaller groups to kind of choose their own adventure. But no student has ever said that they have not had just the most exciting and enjoyable time in the areas that we have visited.

Lessons Learned and Looking Ahead

A study away trip is never perfect the first time. It rarely is perfect any time. But it does get a little better each time it is facilitated, and I have learned many lessons and strengthened my program with each iteration. My biggest lessons learned lie in the pre-planning stages. The more that I have planned ahead, the better the trip goes. Anticipating the questions that will be asked is always the easiest way to prepare. My first year, I felt as though I didn't really know what I didn't know. And so, each year, I continue to build almost an FAQ of things that I didn't anticipate being asked, but learned along the way that I might need to know. Unfortunately, I've had to learn my share of what to do in an emergency, such as procedures for a medical emergency each year. But I also find that it is not as frightening as it sounds and you will always be able to persevere through it. Another thing I've learned is having a second adult, or second facilitator, is helpful. So, whenever that can be built in, I certainly would encourage it. And finally, my other biggest lesson learned is at the end of the day, as long as everybody is there and accounted for and doing basically what they're supposed to be doing, it really is okay. Sometimes things go a little array, but sometimes those are the best days as well. And you can always reflect back on it and do it differently the next time. I always ask my students to do reflection journals at the start, the middle, and the end. It helps me calibrate what their expectations are, how things are going and kind of gives me a good overview of how the trip culminated for them. I always sit back with a smile reading about the fantastic trips that were had from each of their perspectives.

Looking ahead, I am going to Puerto Rico again this upcoming summer. I'm very excited about that opportunity. I'm also looking forward to planning a new site in 2026. It may be a different site in Greece, and it may be Italy. I'm exploring some options, and I'm looking forward to doing either of those in the upcoming future. In true educator fashion, I am happy to share my experiences and help others plan the next fantastic trip, talk about things I've struggled with, things that worked well, and things that I wish I had done differently. I really hope that you have the opportunity to explore some great areas of the world, work with some fantastic international colleagues and work with your students in this way. My students almost undoubtedly say that the study away experience was the highlight of their entire program if they had the opportunity to go. I hope you get to share this adventure with your students as well.



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Biography

Dr. Elizabeth Burns is an associate professor and the School Library Program Director for the Library and Information Studies Program at Old Dominion University. Her work focuses on curriculum and instruction, assessment, school library pedagogy, and information literacy.