

Adventures from the Road: A Summer Study Away Course That Embodies the Multicultural Perspectives of our Nation

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Abstract

This article explores the reinvention of the traditional study abroad experience into a program called "Study Away," closely tied to the Educator Preparation Program. While study abroad opportunities can be inaccessible and affected by factors like cost and travel restrictions, the Study Away program offers an inclusive alternative. In light of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the purpose of studying abroad has been reevaluated, leading to the development of this innovative approach. The article highlights the experiences of students participating in the Study Away program during their summer term. It showcases how students engage with diverse cultures within our nation and gain multicultural perspectives through this adapted study abroad experience. The Study Away program provides an accessible and enriching educational opportunity, aligning closely with the goals of the Educator Preparation Program.

Keywords: travel, cultural experiences, EPP, experiential learning, diversity, engagement

Unleashing the Journey

Study Abroad has changed my life. I am not unique in this, and, in fact, there is a plethora of research to support the positive impact of study abroad experiences (Bain & Yaklin, 2019; Nerlich, 2021; Ruth et al., 2019). I am not here to contradict the value of international travel. Rather, I am sharing an experience that was developed to address a variety of issues associated with international travel at this moment in our world history and our national identity. When I was teaching in a Title-1 middle and secondary school in southwest Houston, I led two trips abroad. While recruiting for one of these trips, I remember one powerful encounter. I hosted an informational session that was well attended. There was a student there who asked thoughtful questions and seemed to bubble with excitement at the chance to travel outside our small corner of the city. He didn't return for a second meeting.

The trip came and went. A few years later, that student returned to my classroom and asked me if I remembered that he had been at this meeting. Vaguely. He then said

that the reason he didn't return for any follow-ups was that he had spoken with his parents that evening and had discovered that he was undocumented. Imagine thinking that you were a citizen of the United States and finding out, as an eighth grader, that you were not. It was a huge shift and, at that time, created a lot of uncertainty regarding the next steps after high school graduation. I was floored! Why didn't he tell me? Why hadn't I considered that? I knew my school population and, in fact, had engaged in serious discussions with our students about whether they should even apply for DACA. It was a huge miss for me as an educator and one that I hoped to rectify when I had the chance.

Fueling Wanderlust

Pretty quickly after that, I transitioned to higher education. I went on a trip to Costa Rica with a group of students and under the mentorship of a wonderful colleague, who has since become a lifelong friend. I wanted to see how the paperwork worked, and this experience was pivotal in paving the way for my next steps.

I dreamed up a domestic road trip and shared my early thoughts with colleagues. I was quickly brought back down to earth by one of my friends on campus. “Sarah, have you ever read *The Magic Bus* by Doug Brinkley?” she asked me. “He basically did exactly what you’re thinking about doing. You should read it and get some ideas.”

Cowed, I purchased the book and dove into his adventures with a group of students around the United States. Brinkley shared the funny moments, the missteps, the trials, and the realities of life on the road. He painted a picture of a multicultural America I hoped to share with my students. I reached out and was thrilled when he responded. I could not have planned this trip without Doug’s mentorship and support.

This trip was a synthesis of several needs that I had noticed on my campus and within my department. I wanted to create a Study Away experience that would not require “papers” - meaning my undocumented students could attend. It also needed to be low-cost. With grant, college, and university support, I was able to bring the cost of the trip down to well below \$1,000 for the five weeks. Additionally, I wanted it to generate as many of the benefits of studying abroad as I could. I wanted students to immerse themselves in multicultural experiences, become more independent, learn more about themselves, meet new people, and gain skills and stories that could enhance their resumes and/or increase future job opportunities. Finally, I wanted it to be aligned with the pre-service teacher degree plan. At my institution, the degree plan for our pre-service teachers is very rigid. By finding a course that could be facilitated from the road, my hope was to provide a transformational learning experience that even our pre-service teachers could attend!

Charting the Course

With an aim at highlighting the multicultural fabric of our United States and doing it on a dime, I began to plan. I wanted to highlight the vibrancy and contemporary stories of our Native American/American Indian communities through experiences in the Southwest as well as in the Great Smoky Mountains. Many of my students had never been outside of Texas, let alone our small rural community, so I wanted an urban experience and landed on destinations such as Chicago, New York City, Atlanta, and our nation’s capital. Our community is in the Pineywoods of Deep East

Texas, so I also wanted geographic variety - the deserts of the southwest, the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, the plains of Middle America, the vastness of the Great Lakes, and the more recognizable East Coast landscapes. I wanted students to stand in key places related to our nation’s story, so we visited the Cliff Dwellings of the Ancestral Pueblo at Mesa Verde National Park, walked and walked and walked through historical foot tours of our nation’s major cities, visited the Oconaluftee Indian Village, saw the robber baron lifestyle at the Biltmore Estate, the legacy of oppression and racism at the Whitney Plantation, the cultural diffusion and food culture of New Orleans, and more.

The plan was in place but would not have gotten off the ground without support across my campus. My former chair encouraged me to apply for the President’s Innovation Fund, an internal grant opportunity on campus. The award helped to provide transformational experiences to students, like attending a Broadway Show in New York City, visiting the Whitney Plantation outside of New Orleans, and learning more about economic concepts through a tour of the Hershey factory. He also helped me think outside the box regarding a Professorship that I held in my department. The Montgomery Professorship for Humane Education focuses on “encourag[ing] and perpetuat[ing] the teaching of Humane Education concepts and methods in the public and private elementary and secondary schools through the support of teacher preparation in Humane Education.” I could do this through the outdoor experiences my students would have as participants in this adventure. Therefore, funds could be used to support our camping at state and national parks and the interpretative tours. My dean also offered support with transportation. This support, we would come to find out in the weeks leading up to our departure, was imperative! Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, beginning in March of 2022 and still occurring as of the writing of this narrative, led to record prices for gasoline. But the economic sanctions on Russia were not the only cause of our surge in prices. At the same time as our departure, China began to ease its COVID-19 lockdown rules leading to an increase in demand without an increased supply of gasoline in that country (Isidore, 2022). As we know, we are a global society, and these worldwide events have massive trickle-down impacts domestically as well.

COVID-19 did play a role in planning for our own Study Away trip as well. Our university, located in Texas, could not require vaccinations due to our state Governor, Greg Abbott's ban on vaccine mandates (Allen, 2021). This means that I could not make vaccination a requirement for travel and that I would need to be vigilant in updates to COVID-19 restrictions across the country. We knew to travel with our vaccine cards if we had them and to add facemasks to the required items on the provided packing list. This also made making any solid plans in New York and Washington, DC, unwise. In the planning stage, New York City still had vaccine mandates, and at the time of departure, while the city had eased that requirement, it had allowed businesses to make the decision on an individual level. This meant that the Tenement Museum was out, and the show on Broadway was tentative at best. It also made my plans to visit with the Native American Community Academy (NACA) in Albuquerque unethical. According to a study led by Princeton University, Native Americans experienced a significantly higher rate of COVID-19 mortality than other racial and ethnic groups (Williams, 2021). Ultimately, this school visit would be canceled for the 2022 trip.

Additionally, we needed to make economic decisions regarding transportation, lodging, and food. This means I was the sole driver of a Mercedes Sprinter Van as we logged thousands of miles. We camped at state and national parks, and on more than one occasion, the students found us free wild camping - or boondocking - locations using the iOverlander app. We selected hostels and motels

instead of hotels and even the occasional Airbnb if a weather emergency like hail or tornado warnings threatened our tent life as it had at Caprock Canyon State Park in Texas and outside of Hershey, Pennsylvania. We ate with the plan of saving our food for the next meal, almost always carrying our mess kits with us to save our lunch for dinner or our dinner for a cold breakfast the next day. It truly was a trip based on ingenuity and budgeting, with much of the decision-making falling on the students.

But flexibility and creativity are skills needed on the road. Undeterred, I pushed forward. We would figure it out! Through various recruitment events that were virtual due to COVID-19 in the fall 2021 semester and face-to-face in spring 2022, I eventually had my group of students, a piece of paper from my university telling me I was able to drive the diesel van, funding from a truly supportive community, and an excitement to get on the road.

Hitting the Road

The actual Study Away trip was associated with a course that officially ran in the spring semester. Each student earned a withheld (WH) with the understanding that their grades would be updated when we returned from the actual trip, which occurred in the summer. The reason for this fancy paperwork was simple: financial aid. Students who are not enrolled full-time do not receive financial aid. So, being enrolled in the spring semester as a full-time student gave them access to financial aid, which covered the costs associated with the course.

Figure 1.

Study Away students on the morning of our departure.



This paper will not go through a day-by-day replay of each activity, assignment, and adventure. Rather, it will share highlights from the trip and conclude with recommendations for improvement.

Reflective Journaling

Figure 2.

Reflective journaling around the campsite



We departed our university, and our first few days were all about getting acclimated to this “on-the-road” culture. We set up camp several times, had to deviate from our plans when a tornado warning made staying at our sight too much of a risk, and practiced the skill of navigating a laundromat. We also were introduced to the course assignments and engaged in the first of each activity.

Students were asked to keep a reflective journal about their experiences through the lens of multicultural perspectives. They were given set times in which they could write. In the above image, our students had just set camp for the first time and were reflecting on that experience and our first nature hike. They were making individual goals for themselves and identifying potential areas of difficulty as we traveled around the country. These challenges could be associated with biases, prejudices, phobias, or financial concerns.

The reflective journals allowed me to collect valuable data later about which activities really resonated with students and which activities could be eliminated for future travel.

Interpretative Programs

Throughout our adventures, we also engaged with various professionals and community members. The image

below shows three of my study-away students with Ranger Gianna. Ranger Gianna had led us on a tour of the Long House at Mesa Verde, where we learned about the Ancestral Pueblo. We also learned about the continued legacy of Pueblans in this area, which left a lasting impression on one of my students who, as a Native American herself, was interested to see ways to engage with her culture and the various professional pathways for that. This student wrote, “We did something I’ve dreamed of doing. Our group toured the ancient Pueblo cliff dwellings. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve seen pictures, but they do them no justice. It was amazing seeing and learning about ancient civilizations. We learned about the multiculturalism within the ancient Pueblos in Mesa Verde... Our tour guide’s name was Gianna, and she was amazing. Since I have debated becoming a park ranger for a while now, I asked some questions about how she did it” (Study Away Student, 2022).

Figure 3.

Study Away students with Ranger Gianna at Mesa Verde National Park.



We also did what readers might expect as more traditional activities, museum tours in Lincoln, architecture tours in Chicago, and history tours at Gettysburg, Colonial Williamsburg, and the Biltmore Estate in Asheville. I do want to make sure that I mention a few other tours that

really excited my students. The first is the tour at Hershey where students were able to make their own chocolate bars and learn basic economic concepts by participating in the children’s session. They also experienced the close correlation between culture and food on a walking tour of

New Orleans where we ate muffulettas, beignets, seafood jambalaya and more! We often think Cajun and Creole when we think of New Orleans, but rarely do our students get to be introduced to the Italian influence of this city.

Additionally, as a relocated Jersey girl, I believed it critical for students to experience Broadway in New York City (see figure 4). I selected *American Buffalo* as our

show, and we started the night with a family-style dinner at Carmine's. If I am completely honest, Mamet's story about three small-time hustlers who want to be a part of the American Dream was probably not the best Broadway show I could have selected for my students' first time, but reading their reflections later let me know that at least a few of them were able to unpack the major themes.

Figure 4.

Study away students in New York City after seeing American Buffalo on Broadway.



Book Clubs

One part of my class that I wanted to ensure transferred over to my study away course from my online, asynchronous courses is the book club. Unpacking critical stories of our multicultural American history is something with which our students need practice, and being able to

engage with them in a synchronous conversation was an incredible opportunity. Each week, we unpacked several chapters from Ronald Takaki's (2017) *A Different Mirror*, and students were tasked with sharing a connection, a challenge, and one way to implement the content in a classroom.

Figure 5.

Our final book club meeting in our hostel in New Orleans, LA



The image above is from our final book club meeting at our hostel in New Orleans.

Opportunities to Teach

Students were placed in partners at the beginning of our adventure. Throughout our six weeks, they were each assigned to teach two lessons: (1) one lesson was based on the ProjectWILD curriculum to align with our geography and human impact standards, and (2) the other lesson came from Stanford History Education Group's Reading Like a Historian. This means that students were exposed to eight

different lessons taught by their peers over the course of our six-week trip.

The image below comes from a lesson where students were researching various environmental legislations and both the positive and negative impacts of these legislations. This aligned with our government and civic standards for social studies education.

Figure 6.

Study away students engaged in a ProjectWILD Lesson in Central Park.



While many more adventures made up this trip, the highlights were shared above. These students engaged in the traditional curriculum - journal reflections, discussions, teaching... but they also had the opportunity to absorb so much more! They engaged in our critical history as we traveled around and visited the locations we were reading about. This course, by its very nature, was transformative.

Reflecting on the Open Road: Unveiling Transformative Experiences

This program took great care in selecting a diverse group of students, with an equal distribution of seniors, juniors, sophomores, and freshmen. The majority of participants were pursuing a major in Interdisciplinary Studies, EC-6, although we also had representation from other disciplines such as Biology, Business Management, History, and Liberal Studies. When I asked my students why they chose to be part of this program, their answers echoed the motivations commonly associated with studying abroad: the desire to explore new places, immerse themselves in different cultures, and foster independence (Institute for the International Education of Students, n.d.).

Moreover, the benefits of this study away experience align with the recognized advantages of studying abroad, as highlighted by NC State University's Office of Global Engagement (2022). These benefits encompass the development of crucial skills in intercultural communication, adaptability, and problem-solving. It was amazing to see the students troubleshoot navigating budgetary restraints, figure out alternative lodging in the face of tornadoes, and reroute ourselves after we decided to leave New Orleans one day early. This adaptability and willingness to problem-solve show how this Study Away trip has contributed significantly to the personal growth of our students.

It is important to note that this study is based on a limited number of participants, thus reducing the generalizability of the findings. Nevertheless, the implications drawn from this experience are significant. Our students have demonstrated a remarkable increase in self-awareness, a greater willingness to embrace new ideas, and a strengthened sense of independence. One student's reflection on the experience resonates with the transformative nature of our program: "We bonded and engaged in meaningful conversations about a wide range of

topics. Despite our differing perspectives, we remained open-minded and communicated effectively" (Study Away Student, 2022). This evidence strongly suggests that study away can be a compelling alternative to traditional study abroad programs, offering comparable positive outcomes and personal development opportunities.

In addition to the remarkable growth and development observed in our students, it is important to acknowledge the messy, wild, and wonderfully chaotic nature of this program, which I would willingly embark on again in a heartbeat! As the program lead, I found myself fully immersed in the whirlwind alongside the students. The days were filled with unpredictable twists and turns, stretching beyond the confines of a typical classroom. Looking back, I now recognize the exhilarating and challenging aspects of the journey. It became evident that more students should have been van certified to add an extra layer of excitement and shared responsibility. This would have allowed for greater flexibility and freed up more time for me to engage with the students, fostering deeper connections and facilitating meaningful discussions.

Furthermore, I could have conserved more energy had there been a second adult companion. The logistical juggling act and the intensity of being "on" for 18 hours a day, seven days a week, brought forth both exhilaration and exhaustion. Collecting research amidst the hustle and bustle

became a challenge that I was unable to navigate successfully. Despite the occasional chaos, I wouldn't hesitate to do it all over again.

The Road Traveled: A Foundation for Future Adventures

The Study Away Program leaned heavily on Jack Kerouac's (1957) message to "lean forward to the next crazy venture beneath the skies," and it is my hope that sharing this adventure will inspire similar trips. I think it's best to conclude by centering the voices of my students. Who best to share how special this trip is but them? One student wrote, "The ability to travel across the United States allowed me to reflect on my past, present, and future experiences... It strengthened my independence, confidence, and adventurous side... I wanted to develop these critical traits before making the big jump to a new home for my future career" (Study Away Student, 2022). And yet another contributed, "The friendships I have made for life, connections for my career in education, and the memories this trip will forever hold are reasons why I will always recommend jumping at any opportunity that even slightly holds excitement or wonder for you" (Study Away Student, 2022). I hope their words inspire all of us educators to provide these transformational learning experiences moving forward! It's time to hit the road!

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