

Student Affairs Study Abroad Subcommittee Report (as of October 1, 2021)

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Summary of Committee Work:

The Study Abroad Subcommittee met over the summer months to discuss the future of study abroad. We focussed on researching trends at other universities as well as our own experiences and student feedback related to study abroad at WSU. The committee members prepared SWOT analyses based on a template with specific questions (included at the end of our report) to research study abroad models at regional, out of state, aspirational, and peer institutions. To complete these analyses, we relied on information available on websites for the various programs as well as on previous experience at those institutions, and we reached out to colleagues (mostly personal contacts) who were willing to provide us with information. We also contacted the Study Abroad Office at WSU for feedback for recommendations and prepared SWOT analyses (using the same template as above) about our personal experiences with study abroad at WSU to help determine a post-pandemic direction for study abroad programs on campus. The SWOT analyses were mostly helpful in identifying strengths and weaknesses for our programs and others.

Based on this research and committee discussions, we have compiled the following recommendations and considerations that we feel would benefit WSU and allow us to be a leader in terms of study abroad. However, it should be noted that our scope is somewhat limited because of the timeline, lack of response when reaching out to other institutions, number of committee members, and limited availability of committee members over the summer months. Therefore, we recommend that the findings in this report be used as starting point in terms of developing more specific discussions, priorities, and plans for study abroad at WSU, after which more detailed research based on these priorities can be considered. It was difficult to provide a general overview of other study abroad programs without a more definite direction about funding levels, travel restrictions, campus engagement, and institutional priorities at WSU.

The further development of study abroad (including virtual study abroad initiatives) at WSU is extremely important because it is estimated that only 10 percent of US college students participate in an international experience such as study abroad (Institute of International Education) which has been more limited and even halted at WSU since the beginning of the pandemic. The general direction of study abroad at WSU should be to offer more options to students (including provider-based programs and broadening the scope of study abroad to

include more than just actual study abroad) while implementing new and virtual programs where there is demand in response to the current global climate in terms of uncertainties about travel restrictions, complications for group travel, and pandemic related hesitations. The most successful programs identified in this report (even throughout the pandemic) consistently had the most options available to students. More specific points are also listed below that would improve study abroad at WSU based on other successful models.

Our report is divided into 10 main recommendations/considerations: 5 are based on programs at other institutions and 5 are based on our experiences with study abroad activities at WSU as well as our discussions with the Study Abroad Office.

Main Institutions Researched:

Boston University

Grand Valley State University

Michigan State University

San Diego State University

University of Central Florida

University of Michigan

Wayne State University

Western Michigan University

For comparison purposes, the most successful study abroad programs on this list based on our research, current general rankings of study abroad programs in the US, and very high percentages of students completing study abroad are Boston University, San Diego State University, and the University of Michigan. The most comparable institution to WSU in this top three would be San Diego State University.

Recommendations and considerations based on programs at other institutions:

1) Several study abroad programs researched have moved toward a more inclusive global engagement/international experience program model for study abroad which allows more diverse programming and opportunities that have continued throughout the pandemic. For example, the University of Michigan currently offers local and domestic study abroad/global opportunities set up with community and public service partners (including a semester in Detroit). These options are also often more cost effective for students than traditional study abroad and open doors for students who are otherwise unable to participate in international study abroad. WSU should consider moving toward more of a global program/international experience model especially if travel abroad continues to be limited over the next few years.

2) Virtual study abroad initiatives should be supported in both the short and long term at WSU and can be implemented very successfully with appropriate training and deliberately virtual course design. However, many issues came up with students completing synchronous virtual internships and online classes abroad from the US because of significant time zone differences. Therefore, we recommend implementing more asynchronous study abroad projects or options to better accommodate students. The cost of virtual study abroad experiences poses a challenge even though the overall expense is much less than traditional study abroad. Students tend to be willing to pay more for in-person study abroad than for virtual activities such as tours that end up costing the same as in-person tours, so internal funding or scholarships for virtual components need to be developed and maintained. At some schools, funding and scholarships cannot be used toward virtual study abroad, which should not be the case at WSU.

3) Study abroad internships were cited as very successful at most other institutions because they incentivize students with valuable work experience and offset travel costs. At the same time, the recent trend of virtual study abroad internships with synchronous meetings abroad while in the US were reported as exhausting for students enrolled in longer-term programs because of significant time differences and should not be encouraged.

4) In our research, we found that Grand Valley State University provided a very good example of a student-centered approach to their study-abroad website (compared to other websites). The website is very informative, inviting, and user friendly which should be the case for WSU. Students can easily find up-to-date information about costs, funding, specific types of programs (faculty-led, provider based, internships, partnerships, etc). It is easy to modify search parameters and filter by criteria such as major and country. Their website is very visual with actual trip photos, and they even have a YouTube channel with videos from prior trips. The website also makes it very clear that students need to talk to an advisor for further details about credits and financial aid for study abroad programs, which indicates the availability of student support and the importance of student success. The more organized websites felt much less overwhelming in terms of the number of available options.

5) In some of the most successful study abroad programs, faculty consultants are put into place to help develop and implement study abroad travel and programs, which is not currently the case at WSU. These faculty consultants work closely with study abroad offices (or their equivalents) and provide one-on-one mentoring for faculty members. This could also contribute to developing a campus network that would make study abroad easier to implement because faculty members could share personal and/or professional contacts, experiences, and trip information instead of faculty members only relying on their own contacts, experiences, and resources.

Recommendations and considerations based on our experiences with study abroad at WSU (including discussions with Study Abroad Office):

1) The student population at WSU does not always have the ability to access funding for study abroad programs. Therefore, programs with lower costs tend to be more attractive to students.

2) Some committee members have not participated in study abroad options through their departments because such programs do not exist. The Study Abroad Office specifically cited the need to develop more Spanish and French study abroad programs based on student demand as well as more programs that offer instruction in English at institutions abroad. The Study Abroad Office also mentioned that Communications does not offer study abroad options and would be very well positioned to do so. In some other departments, such as Anthropology, WSU Study Abroad and International Programs offices are not involved with international fieldwork experiences, and they should be involved to help alleviate the extensive and time-consuming logistical challenges for faculty related to organizing such activities in sometimes very remote places. Broadening the scope of study abroad would allow more students to become aware of the different options across campus and centralize information for all international experiences. In the longer term, this could lead to more interdisciplinary international study-abroad experiences, for example, pairing language students with students completing fieldwork while immersed in a foreign language and culture.

3) Student support implemented by successful study abroad programs should be considered at WSU. A study abroad alumni organization was cited an effective way to promote study abroad and provide mentoring for both inbound and outbound students in our research. However, mentoring for inbound and outbound students by other students requires faculty and staff member involvement to ensure continuity of such a program. Other models mentioned advisors specifically for study abroad as being instrumental in helping guide students throughout the process.

4) There should be more of a balance between the types of study abroad experiences offered at WSU and institutions identified as having more successful study abroad models. Most study abroad opportunities at WSU are currently faculty-led initiatives, which involve substantial logistical and even financial implications (faculty often pay for trip expenses up front and then wait to get reimbursed upon return) and rely on faculty to participate on a volunteer basis. There is sometimes also a disconnect with financial disbursements. Some members of the committee cited examples of the complexity of allocating and disbursing program subsidies and how there should be some level of coordination of student travel and lodging arrangements when it comes to program subsidies. There are also very few virtual options compared to in-person study abroad options in place at WSU. Faculty-led programs of approximately 20 students have worked well in terms of building a sense of connection for students and faculty. However, provider study-abroad options are not currently in place at WSU but should be leveraged especially for students when group travel programs are limited due to the pandemic or otherwise. Provider options were avoided in the past because of some unethical practices (such as kickbacks) in the early 2000s, but there are now many very reputable options including not-for-profit providers that have programs in place and would be able to accommodate even just one or two students for a specific destination or area of interest. The staff in the Study Abroad Office at WSU is considered as one of its strengths for most committee members, so provider options should just supplement other

options without moving toward too many provider options and less support from staff in the Study Abroad Office.

5) WSU offers few study-abroad options to Canada, which should be a consideration moving forward due to WSU's proximity to the Windsor-Detroit border, potentially lower travel costs, and more complicated logistics/regulations for international travel in general. In the shorter term, students will also have different levels of comfort with international travel and will likely want shorter study abroad options until they have developed more confidence in international travel again. San Diego State University has a successful program that allows students to complete a shorter (1-6 weeks or 1-2 days) study abroad components in Mexico because of their proximity to the border. It is also interesting to note that San Diego State University has an international experience requirement for a significant number of majors and minors. It has also been the case that students at WSU tend to value shorter study abroad options. They have often commented about not being able to make study abroad work otherwise because of work or family obligations, and these shorter experiences are the first international travel opportunities for some WSU students.

References:

<https://educationabroad.isp.msu.edu/faculty-and-program-directors/guide-education-abroad-programming/>

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<https://studyabroad.ucf.edu/>

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<https://www.bu.edu/abroad>

<https://www.gvsu.edu/studyabroad/>

SWOT Analysis Template: Study Abroad Programs

Institution:

1. Strengths (Which strengths are unique to the program? What do they do well? What are aspects that have gone well? What do students value about the program?):

2. Weaknesses (What could be done better in the future? What is lacking? What needs to change? What have been internal barriers to maintaining or achieving success for the program?):

3. Opportunities (How can the program overcome weaknesses and build on its strengths? What external factors could allow the program to grow? What could provide an advantage to the program? Which additional opportunities or programs could be offered? How can the program apply existing strengths in new and/or innovative ways?):

4. Threats (Which obstacles must be overcome? Which external factors could limit the program or be detrimental to the strengths of the program? What are barriers to progress?):