

International Travel and Learning from a Community College Perspective

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[Return to Contents Page](#)

Abstract

The authors share thoughts based on their college's international travel experiences as an encouragement to others who want to pursue international education at their own community colleges.

International travel is probably not the first idea people have when considering a typical community college's course offerings. But during the past two years at Southside Virginia Community College (SVCC), we have had the opportunity to design and teach classes in international business and tropical ecology that involved travel to France, Turkey, and Belize for some faculty and students, and we are convinced that such classes will have an increasingly important role to play in community colleges in the near future.

Courses and Logistics

We offered our international education courses during the spring semesters of 2004 and 2005. Trip lengths varied from five to twelve days, and all three of our classes overlapped SVCC's spring break partly or entirely. International business classes were offered that required travel to France (2004) and Turkey (2005). The tropical ecology class was offered in 2004 in conjunction with two four-year institutions and required travel to Belize. Two or three faculty members traveled with the students on each trip. Also, community members who were not previously enrolled at the community college enrolled for these courses and traveled with us on these trips.

The tropical ecology course was listed as "Topics in Biology: Tropical Ecology" (BIO 295) and was offered for four hours of credit. It counted as a lab science course, and completion of at least one previous lab biology class (e.g., BIO 101 or 102) was a prerequisite for this course. Students in the class were required to meet approximately once per week before and after the trip for two to three hours per meeting. They completed assigned readings and attended lectures before the trip, worked on field projects during the trip, and wrote a report on a specific organism after returning from Belize. All students were required to attend a minimum of 80 percent of the class meetings and to travel with the group on the international trip.

The business course was listed as "International Business" (BUS 280) and was offered for three hours of credit. No prerequisites were required for enrollment. Course readings were articles taken from periodicals (both from journals and newspapers). Students were required to attend seven lectures (each of three hours), four before the trip and three afterward. While abroad, they were required to visit a specified set of locations, and after returning, they completed a project that served as the basis for their course grade.

As for the cost of the trips, most students paid "out of pocket." We worked to keep the trips affordable and believe that the experience was well worth the cost. Of course, the tuition for the course itself was covered by some students' financial aid benefits. However, we recognize that the cost can be prohibitive for some students, so we are working toward more scholarship funding for students. Thus far, our college's Student Activities fund sponsored two partial scholarships (each covering one-half of the cost of a trip) for the business management class in 2004.

Our classes were not the first involving international travel to be offered at SVCC. For several years, SVCC has participated in a program in which students travel to Bath, England during the summer and take courses in literature and history. While our comments in this article are based specifically on our own experiences, other instructors who have led student groups to different locations while offering courses in other disciplines could doubtless add to the observations we are making. We believe that nearly anyone associated with a community college that offers courses involving international travel can benefit from such experiences. This applies most of all to our students, but is also true for the community members who accompany us as well as the participating faculty members.

Benefits to Students

The specific benefits to the community college students vary depending on the nature of the program or class offering, but in our experience they include a number of things worth mentioning. First, many of our students have never traveled outside the United States, so the opportunity to travel is in itself of value apart from the specific subject area of the course. This is true with any international course offering, regardless of the subject, and also is something that has been recognized at four-year institutions for many years, as reflected in "junior year abroad" programs and similar offerings. We are convinced that these benefits apply to students involved both in transfer programs and in vocational preparation at two-year schools.

Second, opportunities to interact with students at four-year colleges provide our students with a chance to learn more about programs at those schools – programs that may interest them once they are finished with community college studies. These interactions are likely to encourage our students to pursue baccalaureate degrees. In the case of the tropical ecology class, both undergraduate and graduate students from four-year institutions participated in the course, so students were exposed to some aspects of graduate education, as well.

Third, the pedagogical approaches taken in these classes were highly experiential. Many studies have shown the benefits of such experiences. Activities on the Belize trip included caving, snorkeling, and interacting with residents of a rural community in a number of ways, including a soccer game. In both France and Turkey, students visited businesses and talked with management personnel; they also toured culturally significant sites such as the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. While many of these activities were specifically oriented toward class topics, obviously some of them go beyond the subject area of the class as strictly defined and point to a benefit that any international class could and should offer: an increased awareness of the lives of citizens of other countries with the broadened perspective on many areas of human life that results.

Benefits to the College

The community college as a whole also benefits when its students are involved in international studies. The college gains more broadly educated students, who add new perspectives in their classes. As they share insights gained on their trips, other students learn as well – and can learn in a way that they otherwise would not have.

Another benefit to community colleges is simply the increased awareness among four-year schools of the diversity of programs that community colleges offer. Various misconceptions concerning community colleges exist in four-year schools, among both students and faculty. While many remedies for these misconceptions exist, certainly one good approach is to mix faculty and students from the two in a course, as occurred in the tropical ecology course we offered.

Some of the benefits to community colleges lead to improved relationships with the communities they serve. Most of these benefits are mutual ones, providing advantages to the college as well as to the community members who travel with class groups and to the entire community generally.

Benefits to the Larger Community

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, many Americans have chosen not to travel abroad. This decision points to an area where community colleges can show leadership by assuring their communities that it is normally safe and beneficial to travel to other countries. By allowing community members to participate in an international study program, they gain first-hand experience with both their local community college and with the culture visited. This leads to several benefits.

First, community members who travel with a community college group may simply prefer traveling with a group for various reasons. They may feel safer traveling in this manner. They may enjoy the opportunity to participate in group activities that would not be available to solo travelers. The price of the trip is relatively affordable compared to traveling alone, and they can make new friends on the trip.

Second, the involvement of community members increases the college's recruitment base. Students – particularly older students who normally would not attend a community college – may be enrolling in the community college for the first time. This connection may then lead them to additional involvement with the school in the future, either as students or as encouragers of other potential students.

Third, community members gain first-hand experience with community college faculty and are able to assess for themselves the quality of instruction that is occurring at the institution. This experience should make adults more apt to encourage recent high school graduates to enroll at a community college. It should also give them some appreciation for the work their tax money is financing at the school.

Finally, with their experience of the quality of education at the community college, community members can become informed and effective advocates for the community college system. Perhaps they will lobby state government for community college

funding or for the development of new programs. Community members who become affiliated with the community college may also be more likely to create and support scholarships and endowments at the school. This, in turn, should result in additional benefits to their home area.

Benefits to Faculty

We also should not ignore the benefits to community college faculty who are involved in international programs. Just as with their students, teachers who visit other countries gain new perspectives on the lives of other people and places by visiting them. This occurs in a way that can not be duplicated without travel. When international experiences become part of the professional activity of faculty members, teachers are enabled to provide the sort of international perspectives that their students need, especially those who are not able to travel internationally themselves.

Relevance of International Experience

Many recent discussions of the role of community colleges have involved debates about the multiple missions of our schools. Summarized simply, some argue that priority should be given to transfer programs, while others maintain that vocational skills programs should be the primary institutional focus and the relative roles of remedial education and contract education fit into this context (Bailey & Averianova, 1999). Of course, positions vary, and some argue that the community college can and should be “all things to all people.” In this context, and without further defining positions or taking sides in this debate, we want to emphasize that international experiences can help students to achieve a variety of vocational and educational goals.

Certainly, in some cases, international experience can be an added attraction to employers who are increasingly in need of “globally literate” employees (Tow, 2001). This should be understood by those who emphasize the importance of the development of vocational skills in two-year schools. Community college students need to be taught that U.S. businesses are no longer operating only in a domestic market but also in the global market – in which they compete for scarce resources of skilled labor, raw materials, technology, information, and capital. Students learn this firsthand when traveling in another country.

Even though English is the business language of the world, both U.S. and foreign businesses want employees who can speak more than one language, given that a large percentage of the world’s population does not speak English (Bovee, Thill, & Schatzman, 2003). Workers speaking more than one language become more valuable to their employers, giving them an advantage over those who speak only English. (This, of course, could also be an argument supporting the increased availability of language classes for community college students.)

Travel has long been recognized as a means to give students a better understanding of people from other countries, not only in terms of language but also religious practices, social values, and other aspects of culture. Certainly those who emphasize the value of transfer programs in our community colleges should be aware of these benefits. Some argue that an international component should be part of the education of every community college student (Clowdsley, 2001), and clearly travel in another culture is a superb means to this end. Without exposure to international aspects in their education, community college students can easily hold false perceptions about the world they live in, reinforcing a “U.S. versus the rest of the world” mentality. In contrast, when international studies – and particularly international travel – are incorporated into the curriculum, community college students are less likely to be biased in their views of the world (Beckford-Barley, 2004).

To illustrate some of our points in another way, think first, for example, about an employer faced with the prospect of hiring one of two otherwise equally qualified community college graduates with skills in a second language, only one of whom has experience speaking the language in another country while traveling there. Or, think of students who are planning to transfer to a baccalaureate institution, and imagine two individuals applying for an undergraduate scholarship in the sciences, one of whom has studied tropical ecosystems first hand, another who has not. In both cases, the student who has traveled internationally while at the community college would have an advantage.

We believe we have given our students at SVCC multiple benefits through these international travel courses – ranging from a richer education to better job prospects. Our participants certainly agree. As one student said, “I think that it’s a wonderful experience for everyone to travel, especially young people. My advice to all is to venture out and explore other countries.” The value of the experience can be hard to quantify, but its quality was nicely summarized by another student: “Professors, students, and residents from surrounding communities of SVCC stepped out of the textbook in the real classroom of learning for a week when they visited Istanbul, Turkey. What a life-changing experience!”

Note: We’re indebted to Dr. Al Yoder, dean of instruction at our campus, for helping us fit these classes into our full teaching schedules. Stinson co-taught the tropical ecology class discussed here with Dr. Thomas Jones of Marshall University, Huntington, WV, and Dr. John Enz of Alderson-Broaddus College, Philippi, WV. Both of them worked hard to make the class possible and made available a variety of resources to the students. Richardson taught the international business classes

involving travel to France and Turkey. He traveled with Norm Caine, who taught a humanities course associated with the trip and also read an earlier version of the manuscript.

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[Return to Contents Page](#)