

Internationalizing the Honors College Experience

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Orientations

Auburn University Honors College trips typically take place over the course of fourteen days and students must enroll in a 3-credit-hour course prior to departure. Instructors wishing to design and lead an honors study and travel experience at Auburn University are encouraged to connect with the Assistant Director of Honors Programming at least one year in advance to begin planning. Locating and registering a vendor, planning and receiving approvals for the itinerary and other related program components, and advertising the opportunity to students all take considerable time and energy. The Honors College also provides instructor assistance with identifying potential vendors; building the associated study and travel course; coordinating approval, student fee payment, insurance and vendor registration processes with the assigned liaison in the university's Office of International Programs (OIP); and paying the faculty instructor.

The Honors College further provides interested faculty with financial support for the university-required initial site visit to the country. The initial site visit allows the instructor to meet with key personnel and collaborators, investigate housing and restaurant options and locate emergency assistance resources. Auburn OIP also offers internationalization grants to encourage faculty to establish international programs for students. The grants can cover travel, lodging, meal, visa and other expenses related to the initial site visit.

Foundations

The Honors College works with instructors to establish goals for the trip. This early planning step informs the vendor search and selection process. Honors instructors typically work closely with vendors to develop specialized itineraries—as opposed to selecting a pre-packaged tour—that provide specific mission-aligned experiences for travelers. The AU Honors College highly encourages instructors to build a short research, career shadowing/networking or service component into their trips when possible. Incorporating at least one of these experiences aligns the trip with the unit's broader mission to offer students an enhanced learning experience.

Instructors then design a 16-week, 3-hour-credit HONR course for the trip, which is required of all honors student travelers. Students receive 1 hour of credit for the weekly course and 2 hours of credit for the trip. The course prepares the students for travel by immersing them in the historical, cultural, literary, economic and political landscape of the country. Students also receive weekly updates and reminders about travel preparation processes, including booking flights, securing required travel documents and purchasing and packing appropriate supplies, among other important steps. Also important is the opportunity to build a sense of community between travelers and with the course instructor. Establishing relationships in this way sets the tone for the kind of communal educational experience the students can expect while in country. The hope is that the course also lays the foundation for relationships between honors students that will endure after returning to campus.

I: The White Rose Tours

The thaw in U.S.-Cuban relations that began in 2014 under President Barack Obama and the subsequent authorization of "People-to-People" tours as a category of legal travel to Cuba opened the doors for the AU Honors College to offer the university's first study and travel course to Cuba in 2016. Since that time, the Honors College has organized four trips to Cuba with students, faculty, staff and administrators. The fifth trip, planned for spring 2021 was cancelled due to COVID-related travel restrictions.

The organizing theme for the AU Honors College trip to Cuba is based on a famous poem—titled “I Have a White Rose to Tend”—written by Cuban independence leader, José Martí. The poem grounds the trip in a message of unity and compassion, aligns with the humanitarian and educational goals of “people-to-people” tours, and reflects the Honors College mission to “honor the diversity of human experience” and “serve with compassion.” Students design a t-shirt for their trip that evokes the poem and which they often gift to Cubans they meet during their travels.

People-To-People Collaborations

The trip begins in Havana and moves toward the center of the island through five historically important cities and towns before returning to Havana. Martí’s poem sets the tone for interpersonal connection, open and respectful dialogue and collaboration with local Cubans throughout the journey. The instructor secures the services of local guides and drivers, organizes homestays with Cuban families and invites local experts to speak with the group during meals and at site visits. These collaborations facilitate deep exploration of four key themes: 1) history and memory; 2) art and culture; 3) environment and sustainability; and 4) community service. Pre-trip readings, films, research projects and lectures center on these same four themes in order to enhance the in-country learning experience. Many of the travelers are still in regular contact with their in-country guides and homestay families.

One of the most mission-aligned experiences for the students involves participating in an ongoing community service project in Jovellanos, Cuba. Collaborating with a local church, the students distribute food, medical supplies and educational materials to special needs children in the community. They travel to families’ homes to deliver the supplies and to learn about the benefits and challenges they experience within Cuba’s existing socialized medical system. All four White Rose Tour groups have contributed to this ongoing collaboration.

Reflections and Connections

Upon their return to the United States, students are required to submit a journal blog or YouTube video based on the photos, videos and journal notes they gather on the trip. The blog posts and videos are a wonderful exploration of individual and group growth and a compelling tool to recruit future travelers. Past travelers also visit with the new cohorts during the associated course and attend the final send-off dinner in Auburn before each new trip departs. Everyone enjoys the chance to learn from one another and share their experiences, while also reconnecting to their own travel cohort. Students also become powerful ambassadors for global experiences on our campus, speaking at international programming events and global cultural celebrations.

II: The Honors Business Minor – Abroad

Everyone who exchanges their time for a paycheck operates in a global business climate. It is important for university graduates to understand how global business operates regardless of major because they must navigate this world throughout their lifetime. Research suggests a business minor is a complement to any university major. Adding an international component to this curriculum is innovative providing a richer transformative learning experience to participants. A business minor typically contains foundation courses in accounting, finance, management, marketing, economics and or international business operations. Due to sequencing issues with courses, a typical business minor takes between two to three semesters to complete. Auburn University has developed and delivered a complete honors business minor consisting of five courses, 15 semester hours, offered across two countries in one summer semester. Students study in both Rome and Madrid with a cohort size of 40.

The Program

From the outset, the most important strategic element in developing a program like this is to get input at the beginning from the Honors College administration. Although faculty teaching in the program reside in the Business School, these faculty need to understand the goals of the Honors College and the necessity to ramp up the level of learning for Honors students.

Because the program covers an entire semester abroad, a predeparture boot camp reviews the overall summer. Students are housed in vetted modern college-type dormitories with limited access and security at the doors. The first six weeks are in Madrid. This is followed by a week off for students to travel on their own to have a break from classes and recharge their batteries. The last six weeks are headquartered in Rome. In each country, trips to the local countryside, factory and company visits, panel discussions composed of business and government leaders, visits to museums and other cultural sites round out the experience.

Each course contains its normal content plus other deliverables are added to make each course Honors' worthy. Courses are intensive, one class at a time for three weeks duration each. Students meet for about 3 hours each day, four days per week for the core courses. They then meet an average of 2 hours per day 2 days per week for the International Business course as it covers the entire summer. Culture issues are tied to this course such that the external experiential activities fit well within this curriculum.

Given students travel to both Spain and Italy, applied projects and research papers focusing on those countries are added to regular course content. In teams, Honor students engage research (both secondary and primary) in each country. For example, a comparative paper in international financing and accounting regulations between Spain and Italy work for both the accounting and finance class. A journaling process based on cultural identities comparing cultural issues between their homes here in Auburn, and what they observe in Spain and Italy are employed for the International Business course.

Lessons Learned

At the completion of the program, an overall lesson's learned portfolio is presented. Students are required to capture the entire summer in a weekly diary. They are also to compare and contrast what they learned abroad with what they learned on Auburn's campus in the United States. Some students prefer to create a video presentation to go along with their portfolio.

Given the business model employed, the program costs are reasonable. The total walk away price inclusive of everything is less than \$15,000 (all coursework, accommodation, air and ground transportation, food, cultural events, spending money). Student evaluations highly recommend the program.

III. Honors Study and Travel—Germany

Background

In the spring of 2013, the Auburn University Honors College offered a study abroad course to Germany for the early summer of that year. The course was numbered at the 3000 level and it counted towards three semester hours of upper-level social science and/ or elective credit. The course has been taught twice – spring and early summer 2013 and fall 2018.

The purpose of this course is to provide students a basic understanding of German culture, politics, history, and society prior to leaving for Germany. The course places a special emphasis on the political history and political culture of Germany and the German speaking *kulturkreis* [cultural sphere] with an emphasis on place. Topics addressed in the course included not only a better understanding of modern-day Germany but it also took a historical look of the country to include the Holy Roman Empire and the Prince Electors (*Kurfürsten*); the Bavarian Monarchy (Wittelsbach rulers); the Reformation, Counter Reformation, the Thirty Years War and how religion shaped local life in 16th and 17th Century Germany; World War I and the culture of defeat; the Weimar Republic and its collapse; the rise of Hitler, the Nazi Party, the pathologies of nationalism, and the Holocaust; the Nürnberg War Crimes Tribunal, the Cold War and Germany's role as a leader in post-War Europe. In addition, the course also explored the cultural food-ways associated with the areas where we visited.

Course Organization

The course is organized so that the class meets once-a-week for one hour in the evenings during the semester prior to travel. The students range from first year to graduating students and a variety of

majors are represented. There is no German language requirement for the course and no course prerequisites, though most students have a general understanding of German history.

As the course requires no prerequisites, we work from the ground-up, so to speak, in our understanding of German history. We use one textbook, Mary Fulbrook's *A Concise History of Germany* – Cambridge University Press as well as newspaper articles, short journal articles and video. From time to time throughout the semester, we will invite a guest speaker to the class who will cover one of the areas, i.e., environmental sustainability, forest ecology, city planning, etc.

Prior to our departure, each student is assigned a particular city or site where we will visit, and s/he will be required to present a PowerPoint presentation to the class.

The students are required to keep a daily journal throughout their time abroad and within two weeks upon our return to the U.S., they are required to write a 7-10-page reflective essay on their experiences in Germany.

The final grade is based on the following: a) active participation in the weekly meetings prior to departure; b) active participation during our trip paying close attention to the guided tours of the various cities and sites we will visit; c) daily journal entries while in Germany which describe learning and cultural experiences; d) ability to write a well-written reflective essay paying careful attention to what they have learned and experienced abroad.

The travel portion of the course lasts two weeks – departing either during final exam period or immediately thereafter. We fly as a group from Atlanta to Munich. We are greeted by our guide at the airport and assigned a bus and driver throughout the trip. We visit the major cities of Munich, Nürnberg, Würzburg, Heidelberg, Bamberg, Leipzig, Dresden, Wiesbaden and Mainz. In addition, we visit castles, museums and state and national parks. Each city and site visited includes an English-speaking tour guide who is familiar working with college age students, and we have been quite fortunate to have excellent guides for the past two trips abroad.

I have found teaching this course one of the most satisfying of all the courses I have taught in my twenty-two years of teaching at the college level.