

Student Study Abroad Program Exploration Process

Research Findings and Recommendations

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The study abroad website, advising office, and information sessions are great resources for students looking to go abroad. However, many students still find studying abroad inaccessible for a variety of reasons. This past Fall, I conducted some research to understand how students could be better supported in their experience of identifying and applying to study abroad programs.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with students over the course of several weeks. I interviewed 5 peer ambassadors at the UW study abroad office (who all have gone abroad), 3 students currently interested in studying abroad in the future, and 3 students who had previously participated in study abroad programs. Below **I've highlighted a few findings and recommendations for changes to the existing study abroad site** to help reduce confusion and increase program findability, resulting in more students going abroad.

Below are simple recommendations for improvements to the current website. For a more comprehensive solution, I recommend **developing an additional search tool** that allows students to explore study abroad programs based on factors that are important to them. I've included a document outlining ideas I have for this tool that are based on the research I have done.

1. Students have a wide range of reasons for studying abroad

Recurring reasons cited were developing language skills, visiting a specific location, wanting “something different” or “a change of pace”, establishing or testing their independence, getting a culturally immersive experience, exploring a specific skill or interest (some associated with their major, some not), and the opportunity to just see the world while still in college.

Recommendations

- **Use the students' interests to draw them in and pair them with the right program type.** On your website, display information on how each type of program might meet or not meet a students' interests in a consistent format. Use **bulleted lists** and show them before logistical information.

University Exchanges



Learn more:

[Africa and Middle East](#)

[Americas](#)

[Asia](#)

[Europe](#)

[Oceania](#)

Great for...

- Immersing yourself in the language, student life and culture of a foreign country
- Testing or establishing your independence
- Taking a wide range of University courses

Bulleted List

Prioritize and simplify display of how program meets student goals

UW has more than 70 student exchanges with universities around the world that are available to undergraduate and graduate students in most fields of study. Exchange participants pay an exchange fee equal to UW tuition and attend regular classes at the partner university for a semester or an academic year. Instruction is generally in the language of the host country but a significant number of partner universities also offer courses [in English](#).

For detailed information about UW partner

2. Difficult and/or overwhelming to use the Website

Students generally felt there was a lot of information that was difficult to parse. It seemed generally unclear to students whether they were viewing a complete list or not when they searched for programs by different criteria. Students also mentioned struggling to use the website because old and new programs were “jumbled together”.

Recommendations

- **Reduce confusion about whether students are seeing past or future programs.** By default, show programs that are scheduled in the future, since these are mostly what students were really interested in. It would still be helpful

to include past or projected courses, but clearly indicate which programs these are, and allow students to easily hide them. Consider...

- **Give students more search power over programs accepting applications.** Incorporate filters like “Now Accepting Applications” and “Future” (if it’s possible to predict this), into the Program Search tool (both Simple and Advanced). Students could then further filter the list of only programs now accepting applications. Additionally, you could provide links in the “Apply Now!” and “Search by Program Length/Type/etc” pages that let students jump straight to a list of, for example, only programs with a length of, one semester, that are currently accepting applications.

Mockup

The mockup shows a 'Simple Search' form with a purple header. Below the header, a grey box contains the text: 'Simple Search form fields can be used in combination to find programs that match all selected criteria.' Below this, there are two dropdown menus: 'Accepting Applications:' with 'Now' selected, and 'Show:' with 'Outgoing' selected. To the right of the 'Show:' dropdown is a blue dot with a line pointing to it. Below these are two input fields: 'Program Name' (a text box) and 'Term' (a dropdown menu with 'Any' selected). Below the input fields is a text box with the instruction: 'Type any search words above, or to search for an exact match, use double quotes ("") around your search string.' Below the text box are three columns: 'City', 'Country', and 'Region'. At the bottom right, there is a grey box with three options: 'Now', 'In the Future', and 'All (including past programs)'. A blue dot with a line points to this box. There are three blue annotations with lines pointing to specific parts of the form: 'Add Filter' points to the 'Accepting Applications:' dropdown; 'Confusing filter' points to the 'Show:' dropdown; and 'Filter Choices' points to the bottom right box.


Add Filter
Add “Accepting Applications” filter to make results more relevant for mos students

Confusing filter
Students will likely be exploring Outgoing programs. Delete this filter

Filter Choices
Include Future so students can plan ahead, if it’s feasible to gather this information.

- **Reduce confusion about which programs are scheduled and which are not.** Clearly label programs that aren’t currently scheduled or are not accepting applications, make these secondary in searches, and label them as “unscheduled” in the search list before the student clicks to enter the program brochure

Mockup

Program search results					
Program Name ↑	City	Country	Region	Save/Share	Apply
American Indian Studies/CHID Norway: Indigenous Sami Culture and Connections to the Land in Arctic Europe	Karasjohka	Norway	Europe		Accepting
	Tromso	Norway	Europe		Accepting
Anthropology Rome: The Culture and Politics of Food in Italy	Rome	Italy	Europe		Accepting
Ben Gurion University International Program	Beer-Sheva	Israel	Middle East		⊘
CHID/English/South Asia Center India: Weaving Stories - Textiles, Fabrics, and Feminism in South India	Bangalore	India	Asia		⊘
Public Health Uganda: An exploration of health in Uganda (Exploration Seminar)	Kampala	Uganda	Africa		⊘

Label Programs
Show which programs are accepting applications

- **Simplify the “Find a Program” page.** Rather than making students choose to search by “type”, “location”, ‘Now Accepting Apps’, etc. and then go back to the “Find a Program” page if they want to search for something else,...
 - On the “Find a Program” page, provide tabs (Type, Location, Term, etc) with concise information about what students should consider when searching by that criteria (shortened version of the type of info currently on “Program Search by Major” and “Programs at a Glance”)
 - Below these tabs, provide two main options: “Search for Programs” which leads directly to the advance search, and below that, a link to “Show programs accepting applications right now”. This will help students understand how the search process works while still providing necessary context.

Mockup

Find a Program

This page will allow you to search for a program based on a variety of different variables.

Keep in mind that these links will often inform you of programs that we offer, but that are not necessarily currently open to accept applications. Don't let that discourage you! Be sure you are checking the application deadlines and dates of the program to determine when to apply. You may be doing a great job of planning ahead, but you are just a bit too early to actually begin your application. If you are interested in programs that are currently open to applicants, click on the [Now Accepting Applications](#) icon.

If you have questions about the availability of a certain program, you can write to studyabroad@uw.edu.

Factors to consider

Location

Term

Focus

Program Type

Searching for a program by term can be confusing because many parts of the world have academic calendars that do not line up with the UW quarter system. Below you will find some helpful links to narrow down your choices by term. It may be useful to review the [Programs at a Glance](#) page to familiarize yourself with the different program types.



Short-Term



Quarter-Long



Semester-long



Year-long

Start Searching!

Search Programs

Apply Now

Now Accepting Applications

Tabs

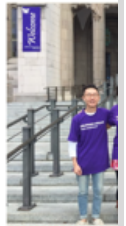
Replace the 6 cards with tabs that give one path to searching

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- **Limit how much students must search for important links.** On the “Getting Started” page, put links to pages in lists after each paragraph rather than nesting them in the paragraphs themselves

3. Cost as a Barrier

Cost was major difficulty / perceived difficulty for students studying abroad. Students were often unaware of financial aid compatibility and scholarship opportunities, and found it painstaking to manually calculate and compare different programs by cost. It was also difficult to manage various finance information and scholarship application deadlines on the website.

Recommendations

- **Reduce the energy it takes to compare programs by cost.** Provide cost estimates that represent the entire cost, so that students can quickly compare. Standardize how these are presented for all programs.
- **Allow students to quickly assess what a program will cost them based on their unique situation.** For each new program, provide cost breakdowns that show a handful of other hypothetical costs for different situations, and what is included in the estimate (e.g. “cost with typical financial aid:”, “cost for UW Semester students”, “typical cost including meals, supplies, and other cost”)
- **Let students prioritize cost.** Consider incorporating cost into you simple or advanced search
- **Link to helpful financial resources in more places.** Provide links to Financial aid, Scholarship opportunities, and additional funding resources within every program brochure
- **Make it easier to find the complete list of financial resources.** In the “What it costs” section, make the link to “Finances” page in the students > resources section more apparent and visually emphasized, since it contains useful information that goes unnoticed.

4. Peer recommendations as a strong motivator

Students seemed likely to apply to programs that people they knew in the same majors or similar academic paths had successfully gone on. Multiple students reported someone they knew studying abroad as a major factor in their decision making.

Recommendations

- **Inspire students with stories from other students *while* they are exploring programs.** Include student stories and/or blog posts by students in more areas of the site. Rather than only showing blog posts as an option on the landing

page, consider including shortcuts to relevant blog posts nested within descriptions of program types, locations, etc. These could include content that inspires students to go abroad, such as:

- Specific stories about their experience in the specific program/location/program type,
- Takeaways from the program that have helped them in their lives/careers, or how it has influenced their world view
- How they made programs work with their academic schedules
- Advice about traveling and navigating foreign culture

5. Students consider several factors to compare their options, many of which are not included in the Program Search Tool

When applying to study abroad programs, students considered

- what day-to-day activities and program structure would be
- their credit situation (how many credits they needed, flexibility)
- location (although they were generally open to locations within the same region)
- intensity of program
- Cost
- housing accommodations
- ability to travel to neighboring locations.

Most study abroad programs won't "check all the boxes" a student is looking for, so students often must prioritize certain considerations over others in their decisions. Students must currently manually find these details about each program and create their own system for comparing them.

Recommendations

- **Let students search for programs based on what factors are important to them.** Consider including some of the factors mentioned above in your Program Search tool, or offering some additional guidance to help students understand how to choose a program that fulfills these goals, preferences, and needs.

6. Academic Planning

Integrating study abroad planning into their academic schedules is a major pain point for students, and many don't feel they can go abroad because of their academic program. Students feel study abroad will extend their time at UW, and that they'll struggle to compete for competitive majors (especially STEM) and career opportunities.

Recommendations

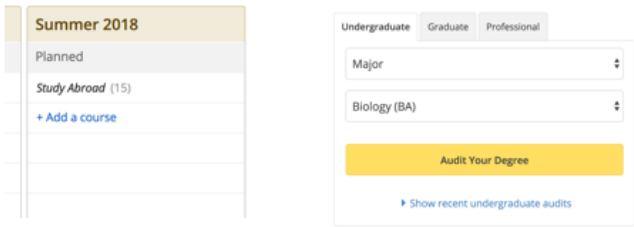
- **Guide students through the process of integrating study abroad planning into their academic schedule.** Walk them through how they can use DARS, MyPlan, and other resources to make an academic plan that accommodates study abroad. Provide general tips for how they can fit study abroad into their schedule. (perhaps in the "Getting Started" section).
 - You could additionally link to more general MyPlan tutorials like the following - <https://helpcenter.uw.edu/myplan/>

Getting Started

Academics

- Do you want to study a specific subject while abroad or would you prefer to choose from a broad selection of courses?
- Do you need to satisfy degree requirements while abroad or do you prefer to take elective courses of personal interest to you?
- Visit the [course equivalency database](#) to help you determine what foreign courses might satisfy your academic needs here at the UW.

Planning for study abroad with MyPlan



The screenshot shows two parts of the MyPlan interface. On the left, a 'Summer 2018' section contains a 'Planned' list with a 'Study Abroad (15)' placeholder and a '+ Add a course' button. On the right, the 'DARS' tool is shown with tabs for 'Undergraduate', 'Graduate', and 'Professional'. The 'Undergraduate' tab is selected, showing a 'Major' dropdown set to 'Biology (BA)' and a yellow 'Audit Your Degree' button. Below the button is a link to 'Show recent undergraduate audits'.

Adding a "Study Abroad" Placeholder in MyPlan

Tips for using DARS to plan around study abroad

Add Planning Guide
Link to existing course planning tools that help students plan for study abroad

Language

- Do you want or need to take courses in a language other than English while abroad?

- **Give students the steps and information they need to assess what their study abroad options are given their academic constraints.** Provide students with simple, concise options with actionable steps organized by academic situation or constraint (e.g. "Studying abroad while pursuing a competitive STEM major", "Studying abroad and graduating on time", "Studying abroad and still doing a summer internship", etc)
- **Show students how real students in their academic situation made study abroad work.** In the "Getting Started" section, provide student stories,

testimonials, brief bios, or other student data that demonstrate how feasible it is to study abroad even with constraining academic or career goals.

7. Fear of unknown

Based on the report *Study Abroad Motivation*, many students face “Fear of the unknown” including the application process, chance of rejection, how it may impact graduation or career opportunities, what will happen if they miss extracurriculars, how they’ll navigate a foreign culture or language, what it will end up costing. These concerns are major barriers to students applying.

Recommendations

- **Demystify the application process by communicating it in a standard way across programs.** Extend the bulleted “Application Process” that exists for many programs already to all programs in the database.
- **Reduce fear of unknown culture shock by giving context to cultural transition a student could be stepping into.** In the Program Brochure and when searching by location, link to resources such as news articles, or blogs, or other websites that capture the culture, political climate and economy, and other contextual information about the region.
- **See “Cost” recommendations above**

8. Lack of awareness of program “types”

Students coming in for advising are generally unaware that there are more than one or two program types, and what type of experience they could expect to get from each type. Once they learned about these options, this information was very helpful for their decision.

Recommendations

- **Educate students about the sort of experience each type of program will likely give them.** Incorporate student testimonials, memories, and/or links to relevant blog posts in each Type section on the “Programs at a Glance” page that give students an idea of the real, subjective experience students had on, for example, UW Programs compared with Departmental Exchanges, rather than just the program structure.

