

Tech Snacks: Taking the Classroom Abroad

With the absence of a dedicated study-abroad office at Northern, how does our campus go about crafting for-credit courses abroad? What are the challenges of creating meaningful study abroad opportunities for students? Dr. Kyra Kaercher and Dr. Grant Olson shared their efforts in creating a study abroad trip to London, what their successes and challenges were, and the viability of future study abroad opportunities at Northern.

How the process started:

In Spring of 2024, Dr. Kaercher and Dr. Olson sparked the conversation one evening about travelling to London in the Spring 2025 semester with students taking for-credit courses, not just a regular trip to London. Both faculty loved the idea and weren't quite sure where to start, but there were a few key areas of bringing this idea to life:

- **Getting Northern on board:** After meetings with the Chancellor, Provost, and campus Deans to determine the viability of a for-credit study abroad program, they were encouraged to move forward.
- **Bozeman Guidelines as a resource:** Since no official "study abroad" office or point-person exists at Northern, Bozeman's Study Abroad office was a key resource in helping map out logistical details of planning a trip of this nature: acquiring insurance, setting costs, travel requirements, etc.
- **Determining how many credits:**
 - With regular meetings with campus Deans, 9 credit hours were proposed, with the option of students taking less and still being able to go on the trip.
 - With a higher credit load, this means students and faculty met together once a week in the Spring 2025 semester to earn their credits leading up to, and after, the trip to London.
 - These classes ended up being offered as Special Topics courses, allowing students to satisfy some Gen Ed requirements.
- **Business Office & Alumni Foundation:**
 - In order to start a "fund" for students to deposit money for the trip, the Business Office helped create an account for students to put money into and be used for trip costs.
 - The Alumni Foundation also managed an account for them for purchases over \$5k, allowing for less paperwork to get some logistical items booked, such as flights and hotels.

Challenges of taking class abroad as a for-credit opportunity:

There will always be challenges to taking students abroad, but specifically at Northern where there is no study-abroad resource in place, plenty of challenges arose during planning:

- **Financial Aid not available to students:** While there is already work in place to ensure students receive financial aid in the future, this particular trip required students to pay out-of-pocket (over time) since the time to acquire proper paperwork for them receiving Financial Aid would not be completed until after the Study Abroad.
- **Issues with Large Purchases:** When it came to purchasing flights, hotels, tours, etc. the account created through the Business Office posed challenges as

anything over \$5k requires paperwork for multiple bids, money was transferred to the Alumni Foundation Office so Kyra and Grant could book on their own and get reimbursed.

- **Kyra and Grant Doing Most of the Work:** With the absence of a study-abroad resource at Northern, both faculty members were left doing a lot of the work that would typically have assistance provided elsewhere, but saving costs instead of hiring any sort of travel agency. On the actual trip, not having a trip “parent” of sorts, meant Kyra or Grant had to field any issues students had, like illnesses or other unexpected issues.
- **Timing between events while in London:** One thing that could be improved is giving more time to get from point A to point B as there was some unpredictability in different walking speeds, folks stopping for photos, transportation changes, etc.

Logistical Details:

There are many logistical details to factor in for a trip of this nature, so here’s a few areas to consider when planning future trips:

- **Student Cost:**
 - The total cost to a student was \$2,750 for a 9 day trip to London. This includes airfare, hotels, food, and some tours.
 - They were required to have up to \$800 accessible while on the trip to cover incidentals, meals, and shopping. However, all but one student did not spend more than that.
 - Students had the option to make three scheduled payments over time so they didn’t have to pay all at once.
- **Airlines, hotels, tours, etc.:** All airlines, hotels, and tours were booked by Grant and Kyra in advance, and when asking for student discounts, most tours were very accommodating on discounts, helping lower costs overall.
- **Travel Considerations:** Bus secured through athletics for flying out of Calgary, transportation to/from Heathrow airport planned out, Group communications setup (WhatsApp used, though phone data plan preferred in future). Apple Airtags were also used as a tracking mechanism for students that didn’t have data access.

Overall experience for students, faculty, and community members:

- **Students:**
 - Many students had never been abroad before, which created a strong learning environment culturally and academically.
 - Once on the trip, students understood, and appreciated, the need to read so much material beforehand and were able to tie what they had already learned with historical monuments in London.
 - Plenty of time to explore on their own and choose activities of their own, outside of academic requirements for the trip.
 - Each day students got to take part in a “scavenger hunt,” around the city, and the winner each day received 60 pounds to spend how they wanted.
 - Some of the most appreciated parts of the trip were the unexpected ones.
- **Faculty:**
 - They thought the trip went very well, but would like to do less “hand-holding” in the future - the trip was a bit over-planned in some ways.

- Create more assignments as evidence that the students are reaching learning objectives.
- Making sure there's a person "on duty" in the evenings if something happens with a student.
- **Community Members:**
 - Paid more for the trip than students, but felt it was worth it with what was included and experiencing the classroom themselves alongside students.
 - Got plenty of flexibility on the trip.