TerpsAbroad:
A Blog for Study Abroad Students

Website Proposal

By [redacted]

December 11, 2013
December 11, 2013

[redacted]
Associate Director for Advising and Outreach,
Education Abroad Office
3122 Susquehanna Hall
College Park, MD 20740

Dear [redacted],

The attached proposal provides recommendations to start a student blog on the Education Abroad website. As a student participating in the Maryland-in-Rome program next semester, I have several ideas for how the study abroad website can be improved. A student blog is a simple, cost-effective way to benefit all students involved in the study abroad process.

In addition to my personal experience, I surveyed over 40 students to determine student interest in blogging while abroad and researched successful study abroad blogs. For more in-depth understanding of the pros and cons of blogging, I also interviewed a student who kept a blog while she studied abroad in the Spring 2013 semester. From this research, I have learned that there is strong interest in a student study abroad blog.

As we discussed in our meeting, I included guidelines for student bloggers to follow in their posts. I also provided strategies for moderation, which will help ensure student posts are appropriate and properly reflect the goals of the Education Abroad Office.

I would be happy to meet with you to further discuss the possibility of a student blog. I am available on Thursday, December 19 and Friday, December 20 to meet. I can be reached at [redacted] or by phone at [redacted]. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

[redacted]
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Executive Summary

This proposal provides a recommendation for a student blog on the Education Abroad website that would benefit both abroad and at-home students.

Current Problems

The Education Abroad Office currently does not provide firsthand testimonials of its study abroad programs. The Education Abroad site does offer “Share Your Story” as a platform for students to talk about their abroad experiences, but it is under-used and ineffective.

Results of Research

Over 40 students who have previously studied abroad or who are planning to study abroad completed a survey to determine interest in writing for a study abroad blog. The results showed that the majority of the students surveyed would be interested in keeping a blog while abroad. The survey also found that the main motivation to blog is to keep in touch with family and friends and for personal enjoyment, but that some students would also be motivated to blog for credit and as a resume builder.

Recommendations

In this proposal, I recommend that the Education Abroad Office implement a student study abroad blog, TerpsAbroad, as a part of its website. Students abroad would post about their day-to-day experiences in their host countries, giving at-home students in-depth information about what various countries and programs.

The document provides the following recommendations:

a) TerpsAbroad will be structured as a compilation of individual blogs or as a WordPress-powered subdomain site.
b) Students will apply using a link on their myEA accounts and will write sample blogs to demonstrate their writing styles.
c) The Education Abroad Office will pick 10-15 students participating in varying study abroad programs to be student bloggers.
d) Bloggers will follow guidelines provided by the Education Abroad Office and blogs will be moderated using WordPress settings and plugins.
Introduction

Students at the University of Maryland demonstrate a high level of interest and participation in study abroad programs. The Institute of International Education’s “2012 Open Doors” report ranking University of Maryland 15th in the nation for the number of students studying abroad in 2010-2011. In addition, students have access to up to 70 new study abroad programs after University of Maryland joined the Committee on Institutional Cooperation in July 2013. This document provides recommendations for a study abroad blog that will make the Education Abroad Office an even stronger resource for students interested in studying abroad (Kelley 2013).

Problem

Studying abroad is one of the biggest decisions a student can make while attending college, and the Education Abroad Office has a responsibility to provide as much information as possible to properly prepare students. While the current Education Abroad website provides detailed, factual information about its multitude of programs, it does not provide interested students with firsthand perspectives of study abroad programs.

For many students, studying abroad will be their first time leaving the country or travelling alone. With hundreds of programs to choose from, some students may not know how to narrow down their options or choose which country is the best fit. Even for students who know where they want to study, many questions still remain regarding what to expect while studying abroad.

Students should take advantage of resources like advisors and the Education Abroad website. However, firsthand accounts of study abroad programs can be equally valuable. The students providing these accounts are actually experiencing the programs, so they can provide insight beyond what is currently offered.

The Education Abroad website recognizes the need for student feedback, but has not yet followed through consistently. The office once ran a blog that was used by students, but the blog was taken down after University of Maryland’s WordPress account was hacked. A portion of the current website called “Share Your Story” encourages students returning from study abroad to share their experiences. However, according to [redacted], Associate Director for Advising and Outreach at the Education Abroad Office, students rarely take advantage of this option. Additionally, the Education Abroad Office is currently phasing out some of its scholarship programs that require recipients to submit photo essays or travel blogs, such as the UM Study Abroad Scholarship.
In order to improve upon the current options for firsthand student testimonials, the Education Abroad Office must recognize the issues that have made “Share Your Story” ineffective:

a) Hidden Content

The page promoting “Share Your Story” is hidden behind several links and seems like a side note rather than a focal point, making it easy to overlook. Students may not realize the option of sharing their experiences is available unless they are looking for it specifically.

If students do find the page, it encourages students to contact the Education Abroad Office and “who knows, you might see yourself in a video on our website!” (“Evaluate Programs”). The use of the testimonials seems vague, which might deter students from putting in the effort to share their experiences.

b) Inconvenient Process

To provide a testimonial, students must e-mail the Education Abroad Office, make an appointment, and then come in for an interview (“Evaluate Programs”). There is no easy way for students to simply write about their experiences or send in their own pictures and videos, which might be even more effective than in-person interviews.

c) Incomplete Accounts

Because the testimonials are based on interviews, the experiences students share will be limited to those addressed by a general list of questions. Students will also be recounting their experiences after their trips have ended, meaning details will likely be lost. Additionally, it might
be more difficult for students to be honest if they experienced something they didn’t like while abroad if they are talking face-to-face with an advisor.

Students are interviewed as part of a video. However, a short video clip cannot capture a semester’s worth of experiences or provide many useful details. While a video may help to spark interest or touch on general ideas, students interested in study abroad would not be able to use it as a compelling part of their research or decision-making.

Although the Education Abroad Office claims “firsthand testimonies are undoubtedly one of the best resources for students considering studying abroad” (“Evaluate Programs”), the website presently does not reflect this idea. The Education Abroad Office must make firsthand testimonials a focal point of its website in order to make them an effective resource for students.

**Solution**

This proposal recommends that the Education Abroad Office implement a student blog, TerpsAbroad, on its website. TerpsAbroad would give students considering studying abroad a chance to learn about possible program options by reading about the daily lives of students already studying abroad. A student blog is a convenient way to offer at-home students additional insight only abroad students can provide. In addition to benefitting at-home students, TerpsAbroad would also act as an easy way for abroad students to stay connected to home and keep their family and friends informed about their experiences.

**Platform**

There are many popular and cost-effective blogging and website platforms for individuals and organizations to use today. This proposal will provide two options for the format of TerpsAbroad that can be reasonably implemented by the Education Abroad Office.

**a) Individual Blogs**

The simplest solution is the implementation of individual student blogs. Each blogger would create an account on an approved blogging platform, such as WordPress.com, BlogSpot, or Tumblr. Student profiles on the Education Abroad website would then link to each student’s blog.
b) WordPress Multi-Author Website

Another option is to extend the Education Abroad website by creating a subdomain site powered by WordPress.org. WordPress would provide the Education Abroad Office with a professional site with more administrative control over student blogs. Each student blogger would have an account on the site. Navigation would also be easier for readers, because all the student blogs would be brought together in one place.

WordPress also offers the option for readers to leave comments on posts, providing a forum for at-home students to ask abroad students questions and create a dialogue among students.

Because the university WordPress account that supported the previous Education Abroad blog was hacked and is currently unrecoverable, the Education Abroad Office will need to download and install its own WordPress account, which is free.

Themes

WordPress uses themes, which are templates for the “look and presentation” of a weblog. WordPress comes automatically with a default theme, but to maximize the functionality of TerpsAbroad, other themes can be downloaded and customized. Depending on the theme chosen, prices, customization ease, and required modifications will vary. This proposal will recommend two available WordPress themes, one premium and one free ("Using Themes").

1. Teamster – Premium Theme

Teamster is a premium WordPress theme released by WooThemes that is specifically designed to handle multi-author sites, such as the proposed student blog. Users are able to search posts by author and view author profiles. The homepage features the most recent posts published ("Teamster").
As a premium blog, Teamster costs $99. However, it is one of few themes primarily meant for multi-author blogs and will therefore provide the highest quality and functionality with the least effort ("Teamster").

![Figure 3](image-url) Teamster is designed with multi-author blogs and websites already in mind. Image from woothemes.com.

2. **Atahualpa – Free Theme**

Atahualpa is the most downloaded free WordPress theme. Its simple default format is highly customizable, meaning it can be modified in appearance and to accommodate a multi-author student blog ("Atahualpa").

These modifications will require the work of a developer. However, it might not have the same quality and functionality of the premium Teamster theme.

![Figure 4](image-url) Atahualpa has a simple default theme that can be modified in appearance and functionality. Image from www.marolinedesign.com.
Student Interest and Motivation

The key to TerpsAbroad’s success is choosing the right student bloggers to represent the Education Abroad program. According to a survey of 44 students who have previously studied abroad or who are planning to study abroad in the future, 68% of students are interested in blogging while abroad.

Of these students, their motivation to keep a blog varies:

**Personal Motivation**

Of the students surveyed, personal reasons were the most common motivations to blog. The majority of students (67%) wanted to blog to keep in touch with family and friends or for personal enjoyment. Students also mentioned that a blog could act as a way to look back on their experiences later on.
For Elena McPhillips, a senior English major who kept a blog when she studied abroad in Spring 2013, blogging was an easy way to keep her family and friends updated on her adventures without messaging them all individually. Her blog also acted as a “diary” to look back at her experiences when she was feeling nostalgic after her return home.

**Academic Motivation**

Over half of the students surveyed (51%) said they would be interested in blogging for academic credit. Academic credit can be given by incorporating blogging into the 1-credit course UNIV 269, Connecting Across Cultures.

Several study abroad programs give students the option to participate in the 1-credit course UNIV 269. One requirement of the course is to keep a Critical Reflection Journal, which documents a student’s cultural journey throughout his or her experience. The journal can be kept in blog form and has four required entries. Students are also required to submit final projects. For students opting to participate in this course, blogging for TerpsAbroad could fulfill the requirements for both the journal and the final project (“UNIV 269”).

Blogs written by UNIV 269 students would also benefit the Education Abroad Office. Because the class would require students to document their academic experiences and engagement activities as well as their personal experiences in the blogs, more readers could be encouraged to participate in the course.

**Professional Motivation**

Though fewer students would be motivated for professional reasons, 28% of respondents were interested in blogging as a resume builder.

Blogging is a sought after skill for many of today’s top companies. In 2012, 28% of companies had corporate blogs, which was up 5% from the previous year (Hof 2012). Developing this skill early could be extremely beneficial for students and be a strong resume builder as they enter the job market.

**Applying to Blog**

I propose that after students are accepted into their respective programs, the Education Abroad Office provide an optional link to the blogging application on student myEA accounts. This location will make the application easy to access and

“I can’t think of any downside to blogging—it was a fun thing to do that would take me about an hour, and was beneficial for both my friends and me.”
– Elena McPhillips
harder to overlook. Information about the blog will also be available on the Education Abroad website, where students planning to study abroad in the future can see it and begin thinking about applying to blog early.

To apply, each student will need to write a short sample bio and blog post to demonstrate his or her writing skills and style and explain why he or she wants to be a student blogger. Based on these entries, students from a diverse range of programs will be chosen. Preferably, multiple students from the same program or country will not be chosen.

The number of bloggers should be limited to 10-15 students. By limiting the number, the Education Abroad Office will be better able to moderate the blogs. It will also allow at-home students to read more comprehensively about the experiences of a few students versus a general overview of many.

Moderation

The chosen bloggers need to properly reflect the mission of the Education Abroad Office, which is to provide “international, academically-based experiences in support of students’ personal, professional and intellectual development” (“Mission Statement”).

During my meeting with [redacted], she expressed concerns that student blogs express the goals of the Education Abroad Office. The blogs should emphasize each student’s chosen program versus his or her social calendar; at the core, studying abroad is meant to be an academic and cultural experience. TerpsAbroad should provide information about what a specific country and program is like on a day-to-day basis. Student blogs shouldn’t be treated as a travel blog or a conversation with friends, though they should definitely discuss the adventures students have while abroad.

Guidelines

Student bloggers will be presented with the following guidelines:

1. Emphasize your experiences in your host country, not just your travels to additional countries. Travelling is an exciting part of studying abroad, but don’t forget to highlight your host country!
2. Get involved in your host country. Share details about classes, cultural experiences, and friends you make in your host country and institution.
3. Post weekly.
4. Keep posts detailed but relatively short; preferably 500 words or less.
5. Don’t post about drinking or partying.
6. Keep posts appropriate and reflective of the mission of the University of Maryland.
WordPress Moderation Options

If the Education Abroad Office chooses to use a subdomain website powered by WordPress, WordPress provides several options for administrators to moderate posts and comments left by readers.

Comments can be moderated using the Comment Moderation section in the Setting Discussion Subpanel. Any words deemed inappropriate, such as swear words, will be set as moderation keys. If a word in the set of moderation keys appears in a comment, the comment will be put in the moderation queue for review (“Comment Moderation”).

WordPress also provides options for moderating blog posts:

a. **Bloggers as Contributors**

WordPress uses roles to control what certain users can and can’t do on the site. In order to moderate student blog posts, bloggers can be limited to contributors instead of authors. Contributors can write and manage their own posts, but, unlike authors, can’t publish them. By restricting students to contributor roles, an editor or administrator can read the posts before publishing them to check for inappropriate content (“Roles and Capabilities”).

This approach can be problematic, as there will be several posts a week to read with limited staff time in the Education Abroad Office. However, because there will be a small number of students, the workload should be manageable, especially if shared.

The goal of the student blog is to accurately reflect the daily lives and perspectives of abroad students. Therefore, students should only be notified when their posts are inappropriate, such as when they include information about partying or use inappropriate language. Unless the post conflicts with the office’s mission, other content, such as students’ opinions about their host countries or programs, should not be modified even if the Education Abroad Office does not agree with their opinions.

b. **Useful Plugins**

Wordpress also provides several free plugins that could aid in the moderation of student bloggers.

**Edit Flow** gives administrators and editors an editing schedule by

*Figure 5 Edit Flow is one of many plugins that make moderation simple for site administrators. Image from editflow.org.*
tracking posts that need to be reviewed, are ready to be published, or are already published. Editors can also create user groups to help manage authors and contributors (“Edit Flow”).

**Editorial Calendar** provides a simpler calendar for administrators and editors to oversee their publishing schedules (“Editorial Calendar”).

**Peter’s Collaboration E-mails** sends an e-mail to the specified editor or administrator when a contributor submits a post to be reviewed. The contributor is notified when his or her post is approved or is sent a link to edit the post if it is not (“Peter’s Collaboration E-mails”).

**Placement on Website**

The Education Abroad website is currently under construction, so I can’t make definite recommendations about where the student blog should be placed on the site. However, in the past, student profiles and opportunities to share student experiences have been hidden behind many links and have been difficult to find.

Because the student blog will be a valuable resource for students considering studying abroad, I would recommend that the blog be linked to on the homepage of the Education Abroad site, where it would be clearly visible and easy to access.

**Conclusion**

I am confident that TerpsAbroad will be viable, cost-effective resource for students interested in and currently studying abroad.
Personnel

Reviewing Applications

The Education Abroad Office will need to review the applications submitted by students. Peer Mentors will read the applications and choose the students best fit for TerpsAbroad. Due to a possible high number of applications, Peer Mentors could split the work and leave the final decisions to a specified faculty or staff member.

Approximately 2,000 University of Maryland students interned, studied, or volunteered abroad in 2010-2011 (Kelley 2013). Assuming that this number remains constant every year, around 600 students travel abroad each semester. For the purposes of this proposal, I estimate that 30 students (5%) will apply to blog. If each application takes 15 minutes to review, evaluating applications will take up to 7.5 hours over a seven-week period.

Developer

The simplest way to implement TerpsAbroad is to weave its development into the overall development of the new Education Abroad website, which would result in the same developer building both products.

The amount of work required by the developer would be dependent on the platform option chosen by the Education Abroad Office. If the Education Abroad Office decides to use individual blogs, only one webpage would need to be added and very little work required. Similarly, a WordPress site using the Teamster theme would also take little work because it is already customized to support multi-author sites. However, extra time would be needed to add settings and plugins. On the other hand, creating a WordPress site using the Atahualpa theme would take more work because the default theme is very simple and would need to be modified to achieve the desired appearance and functionality.

Moderators

After TerpsAbroad is functional, student posts and comments will need to be moderated. TerpsAbroad will feature around 15 student bloggers. Because an average blog post is very short and should only take about five minutes to read, moderating will add roughly 75 minutes of work per week. If this work is split between Peer Mentors, the extra time committed to moderating will be very manageable. For example, if the work if split by four Peer Mentors, each mentor will have less than 20 minutes of additional work per week.

\[
15 \text{ bloggers} \times 1 \text{ blog/week} \times 5 \text{ minutes/blog} = 75 \text{ minutes/week}
\]

\[
75 \text{ minutes/week} \div 4 \text{ Peer Mentors} = 18.5 \text{ minutes/Peer Mentor}
\]
Time Frame

The goal is to launch TerpsAbroad for the Fall 2014 semester. Therefore, development should start in the Spring 2014 semester and student bloggers should be selected before the start of the Fall 2014 semester.

Website Development

As previously mentioned, the development of TerpsAbroad can be incorporated into the development of the revamped Education Abroad site. Therefore, the timeline of TerpsAbroad will be aligned with the timeline of the overall site, so it should be finished in the Spring 2014 semester.

Student Selection

Applications for Fall 2014 bloggers will be opened the day students are accepted into their chosen programs, which will be March 10 for UMD-Administered programs (“Program Deadlines”). Students will be given one month to complete the application, making the deadline to submit a TerpsAbroad application April 10. Applicants will be notified whether they were selected as bloggers by June 1. At the start date of their chosen programs, student bloggers will be able to post their first blog entries.

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<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>March 10</td>
<td>Applications Opened</td>
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<td>April 10</td>
<td>Application Deadline</td>
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<td>June 1</td>
<td>Decision posted</td>
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<td>August-September (program</td>
<td>Students start blog</td>
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Annotated Bibliography


   Atahualpa is a free WordPress theme. It is the most downloaded free theme and is highly customizable in functionality and appearance. It is used by Georgetown University on its study abroad blog.


   By using WordPress settings, administrators can set moderation keys and moderate inappropriate comments.


   Edit Flow, a WordPress plugin, allows administrators to keep a calendar of content and receive updates on content.


   Editorial Calendar, a WordPress plugin, allows users to keep track of their posts with features like draft management and reminders to post.


   Elola et al studied how blogging benefited the intercultural competence of study abroad and at-home students. The results showed that blogs written by students abroad helped at-home students modify their preconceptions of countries, especially when the firsthand knowledge of students conflicted with secondary sources. Comments from the at-home students also helped the abroad students think more critically about their host countries. This supports the idea that a student blog would benefit both abroad students and those thinking about travelling abroad.
<http://www.international.umd.edu/studyabroad/650>.

This section of the Education Abroad site encourages students to fill out program evaluations and gives information about “Share Your Story,” an option for students to share their experiences abroad.


This article discusses the substantial role of blogging in large companies. Twenty-eight percent of companies had corporate blogs in 2012.


This article discussed a study that researched whether blogging would improve students’ reading levels. The study found that blogging resulted in an increased retention rate. In addition, blogging had a positive effect on student-peer interactions. Blogging resulted in a stronger sense of community and enhanced classroom rapport.


Huang et al studied what features made blogs appealing to college students. It found that content attractiveness, a service that benefited the students, and blogging support was important to students. This research helps me to decide what to focus on when designing my own blog.


This article discussed University of Maryland’s recent move to the Big Ten, which also results in membership of the Committee on Institutional Cooperation. Because of Maryland’s membership in the
CIC, up to 70 new study abroad programs are open to students. University of Maryland was ranked 15th in the Institutes of International Education’s “2012 Open Doors” ranking after participation grew in the 2010-2011 year.


Lina studied 16 American students who blogged while studying abroad. The research showed that blogging increased self-reflection on cross-cultural issues and helped develop intercultural competence. Over time, students became more open and appreciative of their host countries’ cultures.


This section of the Education Abroad website discusses the goals of study abroad programs.


Peter's Collaboration E-mails, a WordPress plugin, adds features to the “Submit for Review” Contributor feature. An e-mail is sent when a contributor submits a post for review, and the contributor receives an e-mail when his or her post is approved.


This proposal is a guide for faculty members who want to start a study abroad program. It is useful to my project because it provides a sample template with a similar subject matter.


This section of the Education Abroad website provides important dates for summer, fall, and full-year study abroad programs.

WordPress uses roles to control what users can do within the site. Roles include author, contributor, administrator, and editor.


The University of San Francisco study abroad blog emphasized student profiles and allowed bloggers to customize their own pages. Student profiles on the page linked to each student’s individual blog. Students used blogging platforms such as BlogSpot, Tumblr, and WordPress. Some blogs emphasized words, while others emphasized pictures and videos.


Bloggers for Lehigh University were able to choose their own blogging platforms, such as WordPress, Tumblr, and BlogSpot. Student profiles on the main page linked to each blog. Because the blogs used different platforms, each student’s blog was very different in presentation.


Teamster is a premium WordPress theme specifically meant to handle multi-author sites.


API is an organization that coordinates study abroad programs for students. The API Blog uses a newsfeed to feature the most recent posts by bloggers. The site is powered by WordPress and uses a custom theme.


The Georgetown University study abroad blog uses a newsfeed to feature the most recent posts by bloggers and tags to navigate posts.
The site also features student profiles. The site is powered by WordPress and uses the free WordPress theme Atahualpa.


This document describes the requirements of UNIV 269, a class students participating in the Maryland-in programs are recommended to take while abroad.


WordPress themes are templates for the look and presentation of a site. There are hundreds of free themes, but users can also purchase premium themes.


The Cornell study abroad blog emphasizes customization of each student blogger’s page. Student profiles link to each student’s blog. The blog also includes a map of where students have been and archives of past bloggers.