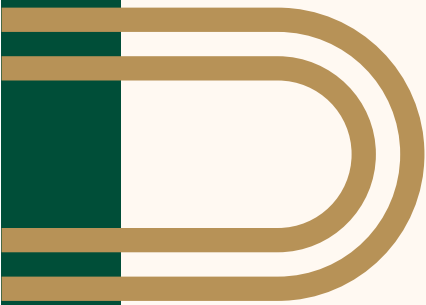




COMMUNITY COLLEGE
INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION
RESEARCH INITIATIVE

UNDERSTANDING STUDY ABROAD DISCOURSES AT U.S. COMMUNITY COLLEGES

LINDSEY KLINE ALAMO COLLEGES DISTRICT

COMMUNITY COLLEGE INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION RESEARCH INITIATIVE
WILLIAM & MARY SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

Study abroad programs, credit-bearing academic and experiential learning opportunities outside of a student's home country (Forum on Education Abroad, 2025), are a longstanding component of undergraduate education in the United States, including at community colleges. Recent attempts to codify internationalization efforts across the sector confirm that at least 38% of associate-granting institutions offer study abroad opportunities to their students (Whatley, 2025).

As open-access institutions, community colleges play a critical role in international education by creating opportunities for students from marginalized or underrepresented backgrounds to participate in study abroad programs. This participation has demonstrated benefits for community college students including increased likelihood of degree completion or transfer to a four-year institution (Gwillim, 2023; Whatley & González Canché, 2022), development of social capital (Fischer & Raby, 2023; Raby et al., 2014), and career relevance (Wood & Raby, 2022).

One way that institutions of higher education communicate information to students about operational information, policies, and different co-curricular opportunities is through their institutional websites. International programming often has a designated section on these websites, which may include individual pages for study abroad programs, international student services, or other globally focused programming. The webpages dedicated to study abroad are valuable tools for identifying discourses and narratives around how these programs are defined and positioned.

REPORT OVERVIEW

This report provides an overview of a recent qualitative analysis of community college study abroad webpages that sought to understand:

1. How study abroad programs are described on community college websites;
2. How different narratives about study abroad complement or conflict with one another; and
3. What critical elements are missing from narratives surrounding study abroad.

Using the Community College International Education Research Initiative Dataset (Nyarko et al., 2025), 178 community colleges were identified as offering study abroad programs as their exclusive form of international engagement.¹ Of these, 137 had dedicated and current study abroad webpages and were included as the primary source of data for this study.

Characteristics of the community colleges represented in this sample can be found in Appendix A. A description of our full analysis can be found in Appendix B.

RESULTS

Our initial analysis of the sample webpages identified three primary discourses surrounding community college study abroad programs: Benefits, Consumerism, and Students as Explorers. We then examined these three primary discourses in relationship to one another to identify a secondary level of discourse and draw attention to what discourses were absent from the study abroad webpages.

¹ *These institutions all also enrolled international students, but did not offer virtual exchange programs, global certificates, or other forms of internationalization at home.*

PRIMARY DISCOURSES

Benefits

Participating in study abroad is framed as benefiting students academically, professionally, and personally, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Benefits Discourses

Benefit ¹		Example ¹
Academic	Study abroad is relevant to academic plan	Earn college credit while traveling abroad [Winward Community College]
	Transferability of study abroad credit	[Study Abroad] will provide students with the unique opportunity to earn college credits applicable towards their transfer degree [Central Oregon]
	Higher GPA and graduation rates	[Study abroad] has real benefits on your future, including documented increases in GPA, degree completion, and graduation rates! [Orange Coast College]
Professional	Study abroad enhances competitiveness in the job market and helps develop skills needed for the workforce	More appealing to employers because of their international skills and expertise [Southern Maine Community College]
Personal	Study abroad is an opportunity for personal growth, self-discovery, and expanding worldview	Through study abroad, students gain enhanced perspectives of the world, learn about new cultures, gain a deeper awareness of themselves, and make lifelong friends around the world [SouthWestern State College]
	Developing intercultural awareness	Spending time abroad gives you new perspectives on other cultures and how others view the world [Washtenaw Community College]

¹ Academic, Professional, and Personal benefits were included as initial deductive codes in our qualitative analysis (see Appendix B). Within each of the codes, different themes emerged – shown here.

¹ These are representative examples from institutions included in the dataset to illustrate how the benefit was identified on the study abroad webpage.

Consumerism

Discourses that emphasize the role of the student as a consumer were evidenced in displays of study abroad programs as products to be selected. Program details, items included in the program cost (e.g., flights, housing), and eligibility requirements were frequently presented in formats that allow students to compare options and make decisions as a purchaser or consumer. The webpages also reinforced consumer narratives through common marketing strategies like emphasizing urgency - "space is limited so sign up early and reserve your spot now!" (North Central Texas College) and describing programs as unique opportunities - "Do you want to see the world? Would you be interested in studying abroad? Well this is your chance!" (Wenatchee Valley College).

Students as Explorers

Students are consistently positioned as explorers on the webpages in this sample. Experiential learning is emphasized over traditional academic instruction and journey-oriented language frames study abroad as a global adventure. For example, Chippewa Valley Technical College encourages students to "let your journey take you around the world."

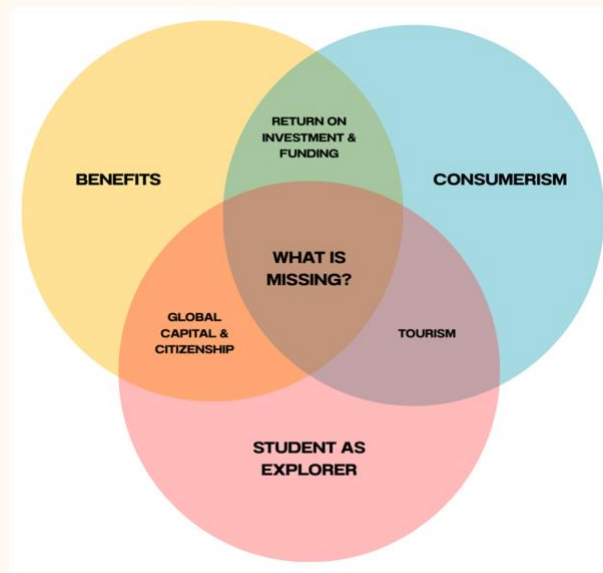
Collectively, these primary discourses frame study abroad as a consumer good through which students are encouraged to extract individual academic, professional, and personal benefits.

SECONDARY DISCOURSES

The next stage of our analysis involved examining each of the primary discourses in relationship to the others. We did this by creating an analytical map (Figure 1 on page 7) to highlight the areas where the discourses overlapped to create a secondary level of discourses that includes framing study abroad as a return on investment, the prevalence of travel and tourism, and the development of global capital and global citizenship.

Between the benefits and consumerism discourse, we see study abroad programs discursively constructed as a return on investment to the student and an emphasis placed on the availability of funding through scholarships and financial aid. By highlighting the outcomes students can expect from the study abroad experience and promoting ways for students to lower their out-of-pocket costs, colleges seek to increase the perceived value of study abroad and address an assumed financial barrier.

Figure 1: Discourse Analytical Map



The overlap between the consumerism and student as explorer discourses highlights the role of tourism in study abroad programs. Attention is called to the cultural and non-academic elements of programs like “a day trip to another nearby city” or “cooking or dance classes” (McHenry County College) as a way to pique student interest.

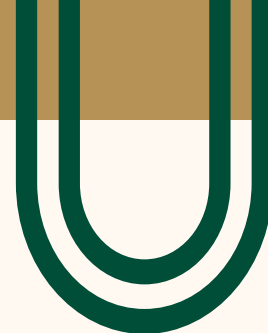
Discourses around global capital and global citizenship emerge from the overlap between the student as explorer and the benefits discourses. Study abroad is framed as both a pathway to acquiring global capital and as a catalyst for developing global citizenship. Both secondary discourses assume students derive personal and professional skills from study abroad that will help them succeed in the global economy and in an interconnected world.

The secondary level of discourse appeals to prospective study abroad participants through value messaging, underscores the commercialization of study abroad, and reflects the career and workforce missions of the community college sector.

MISSING DISCOURSES

Our analysis of the primary and secondary discourses also draws attention to several notable absences from the study abroad webpages. First, while there is ample reference to making study abroad programs affordable, there is little mention of equity or addressing other systemic and non-financial barriers to participating in study abroad, such as caregiving responsibilities, employment, or immigration status. Second, most webpages omit information about accommodations for students with physical disabilities or limited mobility. Third, there is a lack of discussion of reciprocity or equitable engagement with host communities and organizations, positioning these communities as locations for students to extract value, not as collaborators or co-educators. Fourth, the environmental impact of study abroad programs was entirely absent from the webpages included in this study.

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND IMPLICATIONS



TAKEAWAY #1: STUDY ABROAD WEBPAGES POSITION STUDENTS AS CONSUMERS FIRST, LEARNERS SECOND

Study abroad webpages target community college students as consumers, utilizing marketing strategies to emphasize the value of study abroad programs as unique, affordable, and transformative experiences. International educators at community colleges should consider if this is the message they intend to send and be mindful of how this message extends into other marketing materials including social media, print materials, presentations, and study abroad fairs.

TAKEAWAY #2: COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEADERS AND INTERNATIONAL EDUCATORS SHOULD CONSIDER HOW OPEN ACCESS MISSIONS TRANSLATE INTO STUDY ABROAD

While addressing the financial barriers to study abroad participation is necessary, it is also critical to consider the unique challenges that community college students may face when pursuing study abroad opportunities, including but not limited to caregiving responsibilities, employment, and physical mobility accommodations. Students' challenges are not just financial, and simply providing scholarships will not address other, perhaps more formidable barriers to study abroad.

TAKEAWAY #3: INTERNATIONAL EDUCATORS SHOULD CONSIDER THE UNINTENDED MESSAGING OF STUDY ABROAD WEBPAGES

Study abroad webpages communicate that the world is for sale and that study abroad programs are experiences that can be purchased for students' own personal gain and exploration. This messaging is at odds with civic, social, and environmental responsibility that many international educators are hoping to foster not only in students but also the broader communities that their colleges serve.

TAKEAWAY #4: INTERNATIONAL EDUCATORS NEED TO MIND THE GAPS IN STUDY ABROAD

There are critical areas - equity, accessibility, reciprocity, and environmental responsibility - that are largely missing from community college study abroad webpages. These are systemic problems that can disproportionately impact students served by community colleges and need to be addressed by international educators in the sector.

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APPENDIX A

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Characteristic	Category	Percent
Locale ^a	Rural	16.06
	Town	14.60
	Suburb	33.58
	City	35.77
Region ^b	New England	5.11
	Mid East	13.14
	Great Lakes	18.25
	Plains	9.49
	Southeast	18.25
	Rocky Mountains	2.92
	Far West	28.47
Size (Enrollment)	Under 1,000	1.46
	1,000-4,999	37.23
	5,000-9,999	29.93
	10,000-19,999	26.28
	20,000 and above	5.11
Instructional Classification ^c	High Transfer	41.61
	Mixed Transfer/Career & Technical	27.74
	High Career & Technical	17.52
	Baccalaureate/Associate's Colleges	13.14

Note. Institutional characteristics drawn from the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics' Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) for the 2022–23 academic year. ^a Urban-centric locale; ^b U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis regional classification; ^c Carnegie 2021 categories

APPENDIX B

DATA

After identifying the 178 institutions from the Community College International Education Research Initiative dataset (Nyarko et al., 2025), we conducted a multistep search using the internal website search function and a domain search using keywords to determine if the institutions had a dedicated study abroad webpage. To ensure our dataset reflected intentional and institutionally sanctioned messaging, we excluded institutions from the sample if the information was clearly outdated or if the only mention of the study abroad programs was through a news story or press release. Our final sample included 137 community colleges. The exclusion of 41 institutions is not a reflection of whether or not those community colleges offer study abroad programs, nor is it a judgement of the quality of those programs, but was rather to ensure a uniform source of data.

Because websites can be edited at any time, it was important for our data to stay consistent throughout our analysis. To this end, we created a snapshot of institutional messaging of study abroad programs by saving each webpage as a PDF between June 26 and June 27, 2025. We then used these PDFs as the primary source of data for our qualitative analysis. All webpage PDFs were uploaded into Dedoose, a collaborative qualitative analysis software.

ANALYSIS

To analyze the study abroad webpages, we conducted a critical discourse analysis (CDA). In CDA, text is closely examined to identify patterns, constructed meaning, and discourses that provide insights into ideologies and systems of power that may be embedded in them (Fairclough, 2013). We approached this study using a critical internationalization lens guided by four key principles: challenging global knowledge and power hierarchies, critically exploring the impact of internationalization across differently situated communities, centering equity and respectful relationships, and examining the complicities and complexities inherent to internationalization activities like study abroad (Critical Internationalization Studies Network, n.d.).

Guided by the principles of CDA and critical internationalization studies and based in previous literature around study abroad programs, the research team developed a deductive codebook to use for analysis and jointly coded five webpages to establish coder reliability and analytic consensus. After this initial round of coding, additional inductive codes and subcodes were identified and added to the codebook. The remaining study abroad webpages were then divided among the researchers for independent coding. After coding was completed, the researchers identified themes that emerged from both the presence and absence of codes across the entire dataset. In line with critical internationalization scholarship, the codes from the finalized codebook that were entirely missing or minimally present across the webpages were treated as analytically significant.

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION RESEARCH INITIATIVE:

The Community College International Education Research Initiative (CCIERI) is a research group organized by Dr. Melissa Whatley in William & Mary's School of Education. Our work focuses on all aspects of international education in the U.S. community college context. We are especially interested in unconventional, less common, and new approaches that promote access to international learning opportunities for underserved populations and that result in outcomes that lead to a more just world.

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