



# UNDERSTANDING STUDY ABROAD DISCOURSES AT U.S. COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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## REPORT OVERVIEW

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. Community college webpages dedicated to study abroad are valuable tools for identifying discourses and narratives around how these programs are defined and positioned. 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.

## PRIMARY DISCOURSES

The analysis identified three primary discourses surrounding community college study abroad programs: Benefits, consumerism, and students as explorers.

- **Benefits:** Participating in study abroad is framed as benefiting students academically, professionally, and personally.
- **Consumerism:** 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.

**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.

## SECONDARY DISCOURSES

The next stage of analysis involved examining each of the primary discourses in relationship to one another to identify a second level of discourses that includes return on investment and funding, tourism, and global capital & citizenship.

- **Return on Investment & Funding** - 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.
- **Tourism** - The role of tourism in study abroad is highlighted by calling attention to the cultural and non-academic elements of programs as a way to pique student interest.
- **Global Capital & Citizenship** - Study abroad is framed as both a pathway to acquiring global capital and as a catalyst for developing global citizenship. Both of these 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.

## MISSING DISCOURSES

Finally, the analysis of the primary and secondary discourses draws attention to several notable absences from the study about 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.

## ACCESS THE FULL REPORT ON OUR WEBSITE:

<https://ccintled.pages.wm.edu/reports/>

## ABOUT US:

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.

Learn more at <https://ccintled.pages.wm.edu/>.

## OUR WORK:

Current projects focus on the following topics:

- Mapping community college international education
- Financial support for community college study abroad
- Faculty engagement in virtual exchange and perceptions of student learning
- International student support and services at U.S. community colleges
- Understanding education abroad discourses at U.S. community colleges

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