



Cornell College

WHITE PAPER SERIES

From President Jonathan Brand

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“What really makes our courses tick is that a passionate Cornell professor takes students to a location for a dynamic experience.”

The Power of Off-Campus Study on the One Course Calendar

Experiential learning, learning through experiences, is nationally recognized as a high impact practice, and one for which national data exist to support its transformative effect.¹ It may take many forms, and indeed does so at Cornell College. Our distinctive block plan fosters unique opportunities for such study—opportunities that are not available anywhere else. For us, the unifying theme to all experiential learning is that it allows students to connect the liberal arts education they receive on campus with the world beyond the Hilltop. In this white paper, I explore a mode of experiential learning in which students more often than not find themselves well beyond their comfort zones, have their worldviews suddenly and permanently expanded, and then return to campus with lives that have forever been changed: off-campus study.

Why Off-Campus Study is Vital

Earlier this spring I was walking down the Ped Mall with Carol Enns, professor of psychology, who was deep into planning her spring 2016 off-campus class *The Psychology of the Holocaust*, during which she and her students would travel to Prague, Krakow, Vienna, and Budapest. Professor Enns has led many off-campus trips at Cornell. And yet, I could sense her enthusiasm regarding this particular trip—not only for her but, more importantly, for her students. There is a great deal that faculty can prepare for in advance, such as flights, hotels, and schedules. At the same time, just listening to Professor Enns, I could tell that there is so much that happens by pure serendipity, and it is the unexpected that makes for exceptional and life-changing trips.

¹ Kuh, G. D., 2008. High impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter. American Association of Colleges and Universities.

In fact, in early February in our local airport, I bumped into two students and Professor A'amer Farooqi, who were just returning from a Cornell trip to Tanzania (co-taught and facilitated by Dean Riesen '79). Though we only had a few moments together, it was all the time that they needed to tell me, over and over again, that that trip had changed their lives forever. One of them said, "It was the most incredible experience that I may ever have in my life. In. My. Life."

In his own post-trip reflections, Professor Farooqi only affirmed what the students had told me:

Withstanding the rigors of incessant travel, and the challenges of crossing cultural boundaries, the students get credit for scripting a remarkable journey.

[This trip to Tanzania] gave the students a look at issues in economic development on the global and national scale, before they saw how things work at the ground level. But ultimately, what the students found most rewarding was the focus on basic needs like water, schools, and health, and the chance to interact with ordinary Tanzanians. It stimulated their intellect and cultivated their sense of personal engagement. The students were flexible and resilient, and they negotiated the cultural boundaries with remarkable facility. In turn, they were rewarded with an educational experience that will be one of the highlights of their years at Cornell.

I hope that these testimonials already offer insights into why off-campus study is so vital to our students. In the sections that follow, I elaborate on how Cornell's unique academic calendar fosters a number of off-campus courses that range from week- to block-long experiences for our students, why such courses are vital for students and faculty alike, and how our off-campus programs factor into the college's future as we continue to implement our strategic plan.

Off-Campus Study and Cornell's Block Plan

It is true that, across higher education, off-campus study is more in vogue now than it was, say, 20 years ago. It has evolved from "traditional" semester-long or yearlong academic study experiences in which students stay in one location (e.g., Paris, London, Rome) and simply take classes to what are now more focused trips that create opportunities for students to interact with people—to experience, and to reflect on, other cultures and world views in much more dynamic ways.²

Our block-long courses are much different than spending a semester of study abroad. We literally take a course to the center of the action. Thus, when our students study Renaissance art history with Professor Christina Penn-Goetsch, they can be in Florence and Rome rather than looking at slides in Mount Vernon. Or, students actually see tectonic plate boundaries in New Zealand with Professor Rhawn Denniston. They can write while navigating the Boundary Waters of northern Minnesota. They can study economic growth in Shanghai, China. Ours are focused courses on-site, rather than a semester-long exploration into the culture and life of a certain society. What really makes our courses tick is that a passionate Cornell professor takes students to a location for a dynamic experience.

The One Course calendar also allows for classes from different disciplines to take place in the same place concurrently, which provides a broader learning experience. As an example, last year Professor Craig Tepper's Biology-Molecular Biology research class traveled to the Bahamas with Professor Ben Greenstein's Carbonate Geology class, Professor Alfrieta Monagan's Cultural Anthropology class, and Professor Glenn Freeman's Nature Writing class. The classes met multiple times in the evenings and reported on their class activities. The students also participated in joint field trips to explore cotton plantation ruins and experience tide pools during a low tide at

² It is also the case that a number of our students continue to enroll in semester- or yearlong off-campus programs—either offered by the Associated Colleges of the Midwest (of which we are a member), or by third-party providers. We know that our students value these opportunities as well. That said, the number of students who study off-campus on a Cornell-sponsored, faculty-led block-long trip is significantly larger than those who study off-campus for a semester or longer.

night. As a result, all students viewed the island through different disciplinary lenses and experienced the added camaraderie that comes with a greater number of students and faculty all together.

Trips of four to 14 days within a block can also be a wonderful mix of on-campus learning with off-campus experiences in that students begin on the Hilltop, where they gain a general orientation to a subject, then move off-site, and re-convene on campus for culminating seminars or group projects that provide a synthesis of learning on- and off-campus. We are very fortunate to have the McLennan Center in Chicago (thanks to the generosity of Bob McLennan '65 and Becky Martin McLennan '64), a facility that also permits us to make Chicago an academic hub and from which many of the one- to two-weeklong, off-campus courses operate. Students are able to study financial management, studio art, costume design, religion, psychology, the transformation of Chicago as our "Second City," literature and social justice, and museums in Chicago. Chicago is the most proximate international city, which means that students (and faculty) can have life-changing experiences, with both domestic and international aspects to them, at a cost that is more feasible for students.

As one example of these shorter trips, Jenny Kelchen of our Theatre Department wrote of her Costume Design class that travels to Chicago:

In the case of my class, the block plan makes the learning so exciting and powerful. Because the students are only in one course (AND in large part because of Cornell's McLennan Center), I have expanded an up and back in one-day class trip into a four-day, three-night adventure in the Windy City. This is the type of experience that is really only logistically feasible with a block plan. The students can see all kinds of performances, from the tiniest storefront theatre to "improv" theatre like Second City to the big name professional companies like the Goodman, Steppenwolf, and Chicago Shakespeare Theater. So many of our students go on to work in theater (and many of them in Chicago) and these class trips, particularly as done on the block, can be the spark that ignites those passions and choices.

There are so many other benefits to off-campus study on the One Course calendar. For example, students are able to fully benefit from this faculty engagement because Cornell's off-campus study programs rely upon the active and engaged leadership of faculty—many who report "wearing several different hats" over the duration of a trip. Further, students are able to maintain continuity with their on-campus experiences. Members of student organizations (including athletics teams) can leave for a block without surrendering their roles in those groups, something that would not be possible on a semester- or yearlong trip. Finally, a block provides crucial flexibility on a daily basis. If a class needs a little more time or gets waylaid somewhere, they can adjust the schedule.

Ultimately, the essential value of off-campus study on the block is that Cornell courses can explore a wider range of academic topics in a wider range of locations. It isn't just that Cornell students are able to visit places throughout the world, such as Rome, Mumbai, or Montevideo—all in their four years at Cornell—rather, it is that they get to become an art historian in Rome, or a geologist in New Zealand, or an economist in Uruguay. The point is simply that, thanks to our One Course calendar, our students get a unique worldview through their off-campus experiences, depending on how they wish to build their course of study and four-year academic plan.

Cornell offered 75 full-block as well as 19 different four-14 day off-campus courses in the past four years, and students traveled all over the world. (You can find a comprehensive list of these courses at crnl.co/off-campus-courses.) As examples, Cornell students have learned about ecology, literature in the wilderness, and environmental politics and policy in the Boundary Waters of Northern Minnesota. They have studied theatre in Chicago and New York City. They have explored Dante, as well as Roman archeology, in Italy; landscape, language, and identity in the French Caribbean; women and politics in India; international economics in Argentina and Uruguay; modern and ancient carbonate systems in the Bahamas; and medieval literature in England. And, in so doing, students and faculty focus on one issue or set of issues intensely. This combination of faculty expertise and global travel is a powerful means by which Cornell students gain intercultural knowledge and competence; it is to this core educational outcome of the college to which I now turn.

Why Off-Campus Study Matters for Cornell Students

Our goal at Cornell College is to graduate mission-driven individuals who can thrive in any context or setting. Success for our graduates, thus, requires that they are able to work with those who may not share their identities or worldviews—we define this as “intercultural literacy,” and it is one of our core educational outcomes. This goal is not just for show. It is a real and invaluable learning outcome for our students. Off-campus study is one of the most important and enduring ways through which our students cross cultural boundaries. They can experience, and even participate in, the lives, ways, cultures, and values of others—in a fundamentally different setting. They never forget these experiences and how they made them feel, forcing them to learn to question their own values and sense of right and wrong on an ongoing basis. In fact, we want every Cornell student to appreciate, and act upon, the fact that others have different identities and belief systems. Or, we would like for them, at a minimum, to recognize that their understanding of the world around them may not be entirely complete, thus encouraging them to further develop that understanding.

Privilege

On certain trips and in certain settings, our students also confront the ethical dilemmas of privilege, recognizing theirs—an intellectual privilege—while also seeing sameness across all people. While I wish that I could articulate a fixed principle to decipher the delicate balance between difference and sameness, I cannot. Each Cornell student has to negotiate his or her own intellectual position. And, with off-campus study, we can ensure that our students contemplate difference and sameness with firsthand experiences. Ellen Larson '16, who traveled to Tanzania earlier this winter, wrote:

Over the course of this block, I had the remarkable opportunity to learn about and grow in understanding of the large-scale and small-scale struggles faced in a developing country. Not only did I delve into the intricacies of Tanzania's political and economic structure, but also the problems that exist in the day-to-day life of a citizen living in a remote village. Although comparing the problems facing Tanzania and the problems facing the United States socially, economically, and politically is like comparing apples to oranges, I felt I also learned a great deal about myself, and my privilege through this course. I have a stronger desire for promoting human dignity and, even now that I'm back, I am still grappling with the extensive luxuries that exist all around me and in my everyday life. Maybe I didn't make a lasting change on any one person I met, but I did experience once-in-a-lifetime opportunities that will have a lasting change on me.

As these reflections reveal, for Cornell students, off-campus study is a more personalized and dynamic form of experiential learning. It is *their* experience. They have ownership of it. It is not from a text or from someone else's viewpoint. They script it with firsthand, primary sources every day.

“Off-campus study is like climbing a mountain,” noted Professor Farooqi. “It is a personal journey of maturation that offers a very personal sense of achievement. After an off-campus trip, Cornell students have more self-confidence. They believe that they can do so much more than they had previously thought. And, in so doing, they learn to survive and thrive—physically, emotionally, intellectually, and socially—outside of their comfort zone. And, in so doing, they get to know themselves better, AND they get to know the world better at the same time.”

Group Study and Collaboration

Because we aspire to graduate students who know how to collaborate, another reason that off-campus study is important for Cornell students is that they learn to work in groups (in which everyone relies on everyone else). They need to understand group dynamics, overcome challenges, and figure out how to thrive as a group. Off-campus study on the block accomplishes this in spades. Professor Ellen Hoobler affirmed this point after leading a block-long art history course in Oaxaca, Mexico. She told me that:

... in a certain sense, the block plan is really helpful in how quickly the group achieves cohesion while away. In non-block-plan colleges, students are used to having multiple cohorts of colleagues for their different classes, and so while study abroad in general tends to bond students together, it may take a little while. By contrast, on the block plan they are already used to the model that these are the people they will be studying and learning with intensively for the next three and a half weeks. That means that they are more accustomed to the idea, day one of a travel block, that they need to get along with all these people and find ways to work with them ... and this allows them to really immerse themselves further in the study abroad experience and thus get the most out of it.

It is also not insignificant that students, upon their return to campus, feel differently about Cornell College and have a changed perspective on their value system and those of people from different backgrounds; these outcomes have been substantiated by the results of a Global Perspectives Inventory administered to our students in 2014. It is clear, then, that Cornell's off-campus study opportunities are an exciting and efficacious means to achieve one of the primary learning objectives of the college. And, as a result, that expanding our students' access to such opportunities is a primary goal of our strategic plan.

Why Off-Campus Study Matters for Cornell Faculty

I would not want it to go unnoticed how important off-campus study is for faculty. Cornell College faculty throw themselves into their teaching. When they are in a teaching block, their work is all consuming. After all, this is what distinguishes Cornell—because the block system requires that much more of faculty. Teaching on the block is, no doubt, rewarding because it provides a framework for what we consider the most powerful form of teaching. But, it is also demanding. And, off-campus study provides a vital, invigorating opportunity for faculty members to renew their enthusiasm for their discipline.

Off-campus study deepens the student-faculty connection. Through off-campus study, our faculty can share with Cornell students something that they personally love, and in the most direct and genuine manner possible. In so doing, our faculty members are able to experience a place or approach a topic through the lenses of students, which forms the basis for their shared excitement. Professor Craig Tepper said it perfectly when contemplating the many trips to the Bahamas that he has taken with Cornell students.

“I never cease to be amazed at the joy our students experience and the amount of research they accomplish on these excursions. The trip creates a special bond between the instructor and student that persists for a lifetime.”

At the time of this writing, Cornell's off-campus study program has, in the last 20 years, expanded from a few courses for which professors took care of travel logistics, expense accounting, and pre-departure preparation, as well as teaching, to an enterprise overseen by the Associate Dean of the College and staffed by a full-time coordinator. Regular programming throughout the academic year provides visibility to the program, a “returnee conference” allows students to make explicit connections between their off-campus course experience and their academic and career goals, and helps faculty members plan and execute their courses. Our strategic plan calls for continued expansion of the program such that more students are able to participate.

Where We Are Headed With Off-Campus Study (and the Crucial Role of our Alumni and Friends)

Off-campus study figures prominently in our future. Fifty-four percent of the Class of 2015 studied off-campus for a block or longer at some point during their Cornell career. That is a healthy figure, but we aspire to even greater participation. We would like all Cornell students to be able to study off-campus for a block or longer, for all of the beneficial reasons discussed above.

As a part of this goal, we are always seeking to lower the costs of off-campus courses for our students. We do all that we can to ensure that off-campus study trips are as financially reasonable as possible; however, traveling to certain locations, such as India, Africa, or Europe, can still necessarily cost several thousands of dollars. Yet, for many students, even \$500 or \$1,000 can be the barrier to participation. Fortunately, we maintain a modest off-campus study scholarship program supported by a number of endowed funds (and it is thanks to our alumni and friends that this program exists). While the funding available is often sufficient to allow students to participate in an off-campus course, many other students do not accept the funding, because it is not enough to enable them to participate. Given this reality, expanding the accessibility of our courses to even more students is a significant challenge. Ultimately, as an institutional goal, this means that we must do more to ensure that off-campus study is affordable—so that students, regardless of their financial capability, can participate in these life-changing experiences.

This is where philanthropy plays such a critical role, as it bridges the gap for current and future students. Wonderfully, an endowment of, say, \$50,000 produces annual support of \$2,500, which can go directly to help one or more students with financial need. This is not insignificant when many international off-campus trips can cost \$3,000 or \$4,000 above tuition. An endowment at the \$50,000 level, as one example, makes a real and material impact, and does so annually in perpetuity.

Fortunately, our alumni care deeply about ensuring that off-campus opportunities are possible for more Cornell students, in some cases because of their own life-changing off-campus study experiences.

While a student at Cornell, Jan Thomas '80 studied in Chicago on the Urban Studies Program. As she, herself, wrote:

I would say that my off-campus experience shaped my life in many ways. Having grown up in a small town in Iowa, I had no experience living and working in a diverse urban environment, and the Urban Studies Program was pretty much jumping in with both feet. My internship [also] confirmed my commitment to a career in women-centered health care—an interest I first pursued at Cornell in my research methods class in sociology. In addition to gaining the confidence to live independently in a large and diverse city, learning to work with people whose life experiences were far different from my own, and finding a career path, I also met a student on the program from Grinnell College that I ended up marrying eight years later. My off-campus experience created a trajectory for my life that has continued to unfold.

She and her husband, Gary Doernhoefer, recently endowed The Richard H. Thomas History Scholar Endowment for Off-Campus Research, to encourage current and future Cornellians to have the same off-campus opportunities.

In partnership with other funds, the Berry Center, created thanks to a spectacular leadership gift from Jim McWethy '65 and his wife, Susan, has provided significant subsidies for students participating in off-campus courses around the world.

As another powerful example, Georgia Yanicke '67 is supporting off-campus study through The Georgia A. Yanicke '67 Endowed Fund for International Education Studies. Following is Georgia's reflection on why she values her off-campus study experience and has chosen to support off-campus study at Cornell:

It's a "small world" save the differences between places. Books can give you some information but living with the people, experiencing holidays, and immersion in the native language provide a much greater, fully enriched understanding of any country. I was able to experience all of this in my junior year at Cornell when I studied at the Goethe Institute in Murnau, Germany, and at the University of Innsbruck in Austria. What I didn't know then was the immense effect the language immersion would have on my future job as a teacher and administrator. Grant you, my language became German, and I would be working with the Hispanic population, but what was important was that I had a working knowledge of learning and communicating in a language other than English. I have always valued this six-month experience, and it has made me a world traveler. I am supporting off-campus study at Cornell because I would like current and future Cornellians to experience the "small world" we have firsthand as well.

The important endowment funds listed below continue to provide perpetual support for students to study off-campus. Collectively, they allowed us to award a total of \$14,500 to 16 students for study abroad during the upcoming 2016-17 academic year. We would like more students to apply for our scholarship aid, and we want to award more aid to each student, thus realizing our strategic priority of re-imagining the liberal arts.

- The Class of 1955 Student Off-Campus Study Endowment Fund
- The Class of 1964 Endowed Fund for Off-Campus Study
- The Gary L. Menges Study Abroad Endowment Fund
- The Richard H. Thomas History Scholar Endowment for Off-Campus Research
- The Connell Family International Off-Campus Study Endowment Fund
- The Catherine Levy Off-Campus Study Fund
- The Thomas L. Jarom Endowed Fund for the Cornell LEADS Program

These are the leadership gifts that we hope will inspire many more alumni and friends to endow off-campus study—so that every Cornell student, now and into the future, can benefit from compelling and life-changing experiences off-campus.



Jonathan Brand
PRESIDENT

*This presidential white paper is part of a series on matters of importance to Cornellians.
I welcome any comments or observations you might have on this white paper topic.
You can always reach me at 319-895-4324 or jbrand@cornellcollege.edu.*



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