

**Program Title:** First-Year Seminars Abroad  
**Institution:** Michigan State University  
**Innovation Category:** Student Academic Improvement & Underserved Populations  
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**Website:** <https://educationabroad.isp.msu.edu/students/fsa/>

**Project Description:**

First-Year Seminars Abroad (FSA) are opportunities for students to explore intriguing topics in small, active learning environments outside of the United States. The seminars occur during the summer between high school graduation and the start of the MSU school year, typically from mid-July to mid-August. All seminars include at least two (2) days of on-campus pre-departure orientation, followed by group travel abroad for 10–14 days. MSU faculty and staff design these seminars to help students: learn about global issues related to contemporary, real-world problems; learn about college-level expectations and skills; improve critical thinking, writing, and reading skills; develop personal and professional support networks; and engage with global peoples, places, and cultures.

The programs combine global themes—e.g., technology, sustainability, human health, social justice—with a focus on first-year transition. During implementation, instructors use a variety of curricular and co-curricular options for students, and they seek to integrate learning between them to help students consider “big questions.” The FSA programs include pre/post assessments as a means of assessing student learning outcomes, and these assessments are included as part of the program design (e.g., orientation session, re-entry session, assignment) as appropriate.

The FSA programs are coordinated centrally through the Office of the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education (APUE). One hundred percent of the tuition revenue is used to finance the programs. Students are charged an additional program fee to cover the remaining costs. The course is considered a Fall Semester course and is eligible to serve as a general education requirement. The program fee is applied to the fall tuition bill, so students can apply their financial aid to the cost of the program. APUE in collaboration with Financial Aid offers up to \$76,000 in scholarships for high need students, and Education Abroad and the Honors College also offer scholarships. Faculty and staff employed outside of APUE are eligible for a \$1500 stipend.

**Project Objectives:**

FSA Programmatic Goals

From an institutional perspective, the FSA programs have five broad goals relative to the outcomes we associate with participation in the program itself:

1. Introduce students to scholarly and academic life at MSU;
2. Help students develop confidence related to the college transition;
3. Expose students to global learning and opportunities at MSU;

4. Introduce global problem-solving in preparation for integrative studies coursework; and
5. Introduce students to multiple ways of knowing and problem-solving.

**UGS 102 Learning Outcomes**

Based on these goals, after participating in an FSA program, students will exhibit learning that evidences that they can:

Institutional Learning Goal	FSA Outcome
<b>College Transition</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Report increased knowledge of and preparation for college-level academic expectations:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Reading</li> <li>b. Writing</li> <li>c. Note-taking</li> <li>d. Classroom engagement</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Report increased confidence and preparation related to college transition:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Living independently (i.e., living away from home; managing time money, and self; solving problems, etc.)</li> <li>b. Navigating unfamiliar contexts</li> <li>c. Seeking help and professional support</li> <li>d. Developing friendships and peer support</li> <li>e. Resolving interpersonal conflicts</li> </ol> </li> </ol>
<b>Analytical Thinking</b>	3. Use acceptable evidence to make and defend an argument.
<b>Cultural Understanding</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Analyze the sources and bias of information.</li> <li>5. Express an increased interest in global issues and learning.</li> <li>6. Interpret how cultural beliefs influence human interactions.</li> <li>7. Express increased confidence in interacting people with different identities than their own.</li> </ol>
<b>Integrative Reasoning</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>8. Explain that academic disciplines define, understand, and assess global questions and problems differently.</li> <li>9. Explain that local and global problems and/or contexts are connected.</li> <li>10. Draw upon ideas from multiple sources to consider complex global problems and enduring questions.</li> </ol>

**Target Population:** Only first year college students are eligible for this program. In particular, we try to recruit students who are typically under-represented in Education Abroad programs, such as: students with high financial need, students of color, men, and first-generation college students.

**Quantifiable Outcomes:**

- Students participating in a first-year seminar abroad (UGS102) have, when compared to non-participants and controlling for gender, race/ethnicity, economic factors, and test scores, statistically significant:
  - Higher rates of persistence;
  - Higher four- and six-year graduation rates;
  - Higher cumulative first-year GPAs; and
  - Faster time to degree;
- Based on a pre- and post-travel assessment and the analysis showed statistically significant growth in terms of students’ analytical thinking and cultural understanding.

**Qualifiable Outcomes:**

Based on years of focus group, survey, and program evaluation data, qualifiable outcomes for the FSA programs include:

- Confidence in attending college and moving away from home;
- Confidence and ability in navigating unknown places (i.e., moving around on campus, using the bus, finding resources, etc.);
- Confidence and ability to manage self and time (i.e., do laundry, live with a roommate, balance school and social life, etc.);
- Confidence and ability to meet new people and make friends; and
- Confidence in engaging with a faculty and knowing academic expectations.

**Challenges/Problems Encountered:**

Institutional Challenges	Adjustments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finding instructors willing to teach for free.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Started to include a \$1500 stipend as part of the program, which increases the cost for students.</li> <li>• Looking for external funders and donors to help support the programs to reduce costs of the program and increase support for the instructors.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change from per-credit to block tuition.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changed promotional materials to show that students can go on a 3 credit FSA and take 15 credits on campus for same price as 15 credits on campus.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing cost of the programs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moved the program from a one-credit model to three-credits, which provided more credit revenue that allowed us to reduce the cost of the program fee, align with general education (which are 3 and 4 credit classes), and provide stipends to the faculty without a large increase in cost to the students.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing concerns about risk and security, as well as disciplinary issues abroad.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Created new protocols, including a letter of recommendation, for accepting students.</li> <li>• Enhanced communications with students and parents about conduct.</li> <li>• Made conduct and wellness workshops more interactive.</li> <li>• Aligned education aboard conduct systems with institutional conduct systems.</li> </ul>
External Challenges	Adjustments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• International events that generate a sense of danger or lack of safety (e.g., terrorism, disease, violence, etc.).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhanced communications for parents.</li> <li>• Rethinking of program locations—more focus on European destinations.</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changing narratives in the U.S. about the value of college and education abroad.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased focus on obtaining and communicating assessment data.</li> <li>• Alignment of FSA with general education to ensure that the program counts toward a graduation requirement.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changing U.S. economy and demographics – diminishment of the middle-class.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased scholarship support for high-need students.</li> <li>• Purposeful partnerships with TRIO and pre-college programming.</li> </ul>

**Evaluation Approach:**

The FSA central team reviews and analyzes data related to the First-Year Seminar Abroad programs to summarize the prior year’s efforts and highlight key issues for improvement in the future. Specifically, the report summarizes information about the following assessment and evaluation sources and activities:

- Program goals
- Enrollment data
- Student pre- and post-travel assessment data
- Students’ unpacking session summaries
- Faculty summary response to qualitative survey and debriefing sessions
- EA debriefing and review summary
- Parent responses to qualitative survey summary
- Program improvement goals for the next year

The aggregated data below represents the major themes that emerged from various assessment efforts.

**Value Proposition, Financing Strategy and Return-On-Investment Indicators:**

At its inception, this program was designed to be a high-impact practice to advance students’ global knowledge and engagement, not to generate revenue. The assumption at this time is that the programs will run at cost, with student tuition and program fees covering the cost for the program. The only institutional investment being the loss of overhead on the students’ credits and the time of a few individuals to organize the programs and recruit. The administration believed that faculty and staff would volunteer their time to run the programs.

Over time, we’ve realized that additional, dedicated staff time is needed to run the programs, as well as the need for scholarship support to recruit more diverse students. We’ve gone from using .5 of a position to having a full-time position to manage these opportunities.

At present, we believe the assessment evidence suggests the indirect return on the institution’s financial investment is significant enough to continue the program. MSU has garnered a lot of press, awards, and prestige for offering the program; education abroad gains student numbers on its metrics; students and parents are attracted to attending MSU for this opportunity; and student outcomes support our broader student success strategy.

## **Potential for Replication:**

MSU has guided other schools who want to implement first-year education abroad, such as Oakland University and Purdue University. We have conducted numerous conference presentations and consultations about our model, and we hosted a regional conference several years ago.

At MSU, these programs require collaboration between the Undergraduate Education Unit, Office of Education Abroad, Registrar, and Office of Planning and Budgets. If an institution intends to have the course counted as general education credit, then consultation with the institution's general education program would need to occur.

Other schools would need to consider the following factors to adapt the MSU model: (1) What is the tuition model at your school and can you recoup tuition dollars to help support student travel? (2) Does your school offer first-year seminars, and if so, what is the model and purpose of the seminars? (3) What is your school's capacity to mount faculty-directed education abroad programming? and (4) Does your school allow for trans-semester courses or early-enrollment to allow students who start in the fall to start a class in the summer?

Scaling up for MSU has been a bit of a chicken and an egg problem. If we want more students to go, then we need to create more programs and recruit more instructors. If we create more programs and students do not sign up, then we have too much infrastructure.

## **Vendor Involvement:**

Most programs use a third-party provider organization abroad. These services primarily involve logistics arrangements and some services such as guided tours, expert lectures, entry to tourist sites, etc. We also use STA Travel for our airline arrangements.

These organizations reduce the workload for the faculty in planning this short-term education abroad experience. Faculty and staff should focus on the academic program and students, not transportation logistics and meals.

## **Requisite Program Manager Competencies:**

We require faculty teaching the courses to have a terminal degree, and some teaching experience. We expect the program assistants will have some experience working with and education related to college student development and/or higher education. Our Education Abroad Coordinators, and partners in the Office of Education Abroad, have knowledge of the university policies in order to organize logistics, work with vendors, manage travel arrangements, etc.

## **Additional Resources:**

[MSU 2019 First Year Seminars Abroad Report](#)

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