

Global Preparation: Observing the Preparedness of WPI Study Abroad Students

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by

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Abstract

Studying away is an integral and expanding part of higher education in the US. As more students participate, it becomes increasingly important to examine the adequacy of student preparedness. This project involves an assessment of student preparation for the Interactive Qualifying Project (IQP) experience with the Cape Town Project Center. In order to assess every stage of preparation, I surveyed students initiating the process, held a group discussion with students engaging in formal institutional preparations, and conducted two focus group discussions with students who had completed their study away experience. While WPI offers varied preparation opportunities, students remain unaware of many of these and few engage in self-driven efforts, resulting in limited preparation.

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PREFACE: MY REFLECTIONS

Studying abroad was not ever something that I had thought about when I was an incoming freshman at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI). It was early sophomore year that these options were first introduced to me. My initial interactions with the WPI Global Projects Program was at the Global Fair, in which I was invited to the event not fully understanding exactly what it entailed. There I was introduced to the many project centers and program options that were available to me. Prior to this event, I was not entirely sure what the Global Fair entailed; therefore I did not make any efforts to prepare for this event in anyway. As a result, I was not sufficiently prepared to take full advantage of the resources that were offered by WPI.

Shortly after, students within my class began to discuss the possibility of doing a study abroad for their International Qualifying Project (IQP). It was then that my interest of studying abroad grew and I decided on which programs seemed the best fit for me. My first steps were to simply have conversations about study abroad. By hearing about the different experiences my older friends had, I was able to narrow my decision down. Also through these conversations with alumni, I was able to get a grasp of the work that entails an IQP and received recommendations on how to successfully go about the process. After much thought and reflection, I made the decision to make Cape Town, South Africa my number one choice, based off the friends' decisions, project types, and the experiences revealed to me from the recent alumni.

After making my decision and completing all of the institutional requirements needed in order to be selected, such as an essay and a personal interview, I simply waited for selection. In late January, I was accepted into the program along with several friends, ultimately spiking my enthusiasm to do some outside research. I then took extra time to look into the multitude of activities, travel plans, and destinations that I would be able to do while in Cape Town or in my travels prior. As a student who had never travelled outside of the country, nothing was more exciting to me than to see the world around me. That being said, that excitement was both uplifting and blinding. Of all the research that was conducted, I never took the steps to prepare myself for any of the additional experiences ahead such as culture shock, or financial and medical emergencies. This trend continued through the IQP process, in which I was more focused on getting my project done than listening to any of the additional information being provided to me. Prior to leaving for IQP, there was a mandatory pre-departure orientation conducted by the school for all students who would be going away that upcoming term (B term). Again, during this meeting my enthusiasm for the adventure was rekindled but the other information about school policies and procedures fell on deaf ears.

Finally, the proposal was completed and it was time to make the trip to Cape Town. All of the essentials were taken care of, such as my passport, baggage, and travel plans. Prior to arriving in Cape Town, plans were made to travel to Rome and Barcelona.

Both stops were the perfect way to prepare me for the adventure that was ahead of me in Cape Town. With my excitement at an all-time high, I finally landed in Cape Town with a few friends I had been travelling with. The first day or two were an adjustment period to settle in and meet up with everyone before starting the project. During this time, one of the sponsors for our project was asked to speak with the whole group about the reality of the experiences ahead. It was during this meeting that I finally truly felt the gravity of the situation, as he did not hold back in explaining different situations that may occur while we were there. This ultimately grounded me for a short while and allowed me to truly reflect on the road ahead. But things went differently than planned and my experience was thrown off balance.

It was only the 5th day that I was there in Cape Town and I had only worked with my sponsor for a day or two. After finishing up work for the day, I headed home to rest a little. When I arrived at the lodge, I had realized that something felt extremely different and decided to try to eat or go to sleep for a bit. As I ate and attempted to make it to bed, things got exponentially worse and concern grew as my speech and movements began to lose function. I was able to make it to bed and fall asleep, but later events were recounted to me from friends later. I was found face down in my room and immediately rushed to the hospital, as I was barely conscious. After arriving in the hospital, I was taken in for a CT scan because there was concern over a concussion I received earlier that year. It was then that they discovered my brain was rapidly hemorrhaging and I only had a short time until I had a stroke. As a result, the doctors decided surgery was the only option. My parents were informed and decided to fly my whole family to Cape Town, in case of the worst. But to complicate things further, my parents and both my brothers did not have passports, as they do not travel often and were not expecting to need to. Thereafter, they were all forced to get expedited passports and buy last minute plane tickets in order to see me before my surgery. In the end they did arrive just in time and were by my side before I was taken in.

After a successful surgery, I was put into an induced coma for 5 days. I stayed in the hospital for nearly a month and a half to recover, while also awaiting insurance decisions and transportation precautions. There was a lack of communication due to the time difference that lengthened the process. Nearly every part of me, both mentally and physically, was impacted and the recovery was extensive as result. I finally was able to return home with my mother, who had stayed the entire duration of my time in the hospital. Upon arrival in the U.S., I underwent months of recovery and was put on medical leave for the remainder of the year. With a lot of work and time, I was eventually able to return to school, allowing me to finish my IQP.

Another issue that I ran into during this already difficult situation was credit card fraud. During my travels, my credit card information was stolen and charged for multiple expenses. As a result, my credit card was deactivated, leaving me without finances and requiring one of my professors to pay personally for my medical care.

I decided to write my report on the topic of preparedness, using my circumstances as an example. When thinking about study abroad and the many different aspects of the project work, I was blinded to the reality of the experience. As a result, when I was faced with an emergency situation, alongside financial complications, I was taken off guard and was left unprepared. It was also seen with my family, as they had not adequately prepared for an accident abroad. Therefore, it is important to recognize where additional preparations are needed.

INTRODUCTION

Study abroad has become an increasingly significant program of the U.S. college experience. According to a study by the National Association of Foreign Student Advisers, using both state and demographic data, study abroad in the U.S. has grown by 3.8% from the academic year of 2015-16, a total of 325,339 students, or 1.6% of the U.S. student population (“Trends in U.S. study abroad”, 2018). Study abroad programs aim to offer students personal growth, professionalism, and intercultural development. There are specific benefits that are commonly offered by programs, including academic advances, intercultural competence, personal growth, and professional advances (Campbell, 2016). These advantages therefore also allow students to achieve a better sense of self, realizing their individual biases, as well as appreciating an increased impact on their worldview (Dwyer, 2017).

In order for these programs to be successful for students and the communities in which they engage, preparations are needed that appropriately prepare students to get the maximum benefit from the experience while also staying safe and healthy. Furthermore, two origins of preparation that have been observed when referring to the study abroad experience are institutional versus personal preparation. Institutional preparations vary between programs and may consist of many different methods to present the preparations they offer. For example, Hobart and William Smith College uses a series of workshops to prepare students for their experiences (Hws.edu, 2018) Alongside, there is also the personal preparation that students make. Students are provided with the opportunity, time, and resources to further research things about the program destination. Areas of research may include culture, history, language, and other aspects of everyday life, but it is the sole responsibility of the student to determine the degree and method of preparations.

In order to better understand student preparation and its adequacy, this report presents a study of student preparations at Worcester Polytechnic Institute. At Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI), project based learning is a core aspect to a student’s education. This approach offers students the opportunity to solve real-world problems in communities around the globe, in collaboration with local partners, student team members, and advising faculty. The aim of this approach is to teach students how to think critically in situations while implementing skills such as communication and research methods (“Project Based Learning at WPI”, 2018). All students are required to complete an Interactive Qualifying Project (IQP) during their junior year. Students are given the option to either complete their project on campus, at sites local to the U.S., or internationally. With over 40 different project centers offered in six different countries, studying away has become increasingly popular and continues to grow (“Global Projects Program”, 2018). In 2017, a majority of students chose to study abroad rather than to complete their projects domestically, with 78% of students opting to complete their IQP

internationally while the remaining 22% completed their IQP domestically, at the many U.S. project centers and on campus (Bell, 2017). The popularity of global IQPs is also expected to increase. Beginning in 2022, all students will be offered a \$5,000 scholarship for their IQP, potentially resulting in a further increase in WPIs study abroad participation (“Global Projects Program”, 2018).

As a result of the increasing success of WPIs Global Program, and study abroad programs across U.S. universities, this report will assess the preparations undertaken by students engaging in study abroad. This report focuses on students engaging with the Cape Town, South Africa Project Center. Each project center has liberties to prepare students in slightly different ways, relative to the location. A survey was developed and deployed to sophomores beginning the application process, a group classroom discussion was conducted with juniors preparing to work in Cape Town, and focus group discussions were held with seniors who had completed their engagements in Cape Town. Interviews were also conducted with Global Program staff to better understand the extent of standard institutional preparations. Using this mixed-method approach, I observed and documented institutional preparations offered by WPI’s Global Program, the unique preparations offered by the Cape Town Project Center director, and assess how much students engage with these institutional and outside resources.

BACKGROUND

Studying Abroad: Long-term Impact on Professional Skills and Abilities While Expanding Worldviews

As studying abroad has become an increasingly significant aspect of higher education in the U.S., assessments of more generic study abroad programs have found a positive effect on developing professionalism, improving intercultural engagements, and broadening worldviews. Sarah Han of the Department of International Cooperation at the Korean Council for University Education notes that “study abroad provides an opportunity to expand one's field of view and helps one understand and analyze problems and phenomena from a longer-term, worldwide view” (Top Universities, 2014). Long-term study and work engagements abroad also provide students with a time to reflect on their own culture and identities and biases. As identified in a study conducted by the president of the International Education of Students (IES), Mary Dwyer (2017) found that 98% of returning study abroad students indicated that studying abroad helped them better understand their own cultural values and biases, and 82% felt that the experience offered them a more sophisticated way to look at the world. Furthermore, students reported that they continued their intercultural experiences once they returned home, with 90% reporting that they sought out a more diverse set of friends, and 64% reporting that they explored other cultures (Dwyer, 2017). The same study also revealed significant self-reported growth in maturity, self-confidence, and ability to tolerate ambiguity resulting from off-campus/study abroad engagements.

Assessing the effect of study abroad on professional experiences, the 2002 “IES 50 Year Alumni Survey Program” involved alumni from the classes of 1950 through 1999. The study found that 84% of people who chose to study internationally reported gaining skills that significantly influenced their career path, such as foreign language ability (Norris & Gillespie, 2008). In addition, people who worked in the international arena were nearly three times more likely to change career plans following study abroad than the alumni without global work experience. An additional study conducted by the Indiana University’s Office of Overseas Study, found that 96% of students who chose to study abroad felt it influenced their career plans (Orahood, Kruze, Pearson, 2001). Numerous studies also confirm that employers place more value on applicants that have experienced international engagements. Furthermore, if these engagements are articulated by expressing lessons learned and strengths earned from their experiences, students will also be favored highly over other candidates (Tillman, 2011). A study assessing 100 human resource managers and directors further concluded that students who chose to study abroad were more likely to have improved interpersonal skills, a highly desired trait for employers (Doorbar, 2003).

Alongside the benefits of professional development, a study assessing the effect of intercultural development of study abroad programs as compared to on-campus study programs offered evidence of additional positive effects on cultural awareness and competency in studying off campus (Lawton & Anderson, 2009). Assessing scores on the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) and the Global Perspective Inventory (GPI), both intercultural competence assessment tools used by government agencies, corporations, and non-profit organizations, Lawton and Anderson identified significant pre-post test score differences between students who participated in off campus (study away) programs as compared to those who remained on campus in a traditional classroom setting. Comparatively, a similar study of 1,593 undergraduate students examining the effect of studying abroad on intercultural competence revealed that students had little to no observable difference in improved cultural competence (Salisbury, 2011).

Preparing for Studying Abroad: Formal Institutional Preparations

Formal preparations can be found throughout all study abroad programs. When researching these methods, focus was aimed towards the specific types of preparations such as language, health, and cultural preparedness. In order to evaluate certain consistencies between a majority of the programs, I selected several schools found on the *Princeton Review: Most Popular Study Abroad Programs* (2017). These preparations are outlined in Figure 1.

**Hobart and William
Smith**

**Rank
#1**

- Students are offered information at the student center
- General Info sessions are offered at the beginning of every term
- "Which program for me?" meeting to better understand which program fits best for each student
- Language prerequisites or trainings for certain countries
- Mandatory "Program Logistics Meeting" for each program to go over school and program policies
- Goal setting workshop where students meet alumni of their specific programs
- Optional workshops (travel writing workshop, photography workshop)
- Handbooks with additional information and resources

Groucher

**Rank
#2**

- Mandatory info sessions to review policies and procedures
- Language preparations for specific programs (i.e. Spanish speaking locations need a 7 week pre course)
- Study Abroad seminars are required for all programs
- Mandatory pre-departure orientations to further discuss travel, health and safety, policies, and procedures
- Some programs require an on-site immersion course for a semester

WPI

**Rank
#10**

- Global Fair for students to learn about the many project center options
- Site session videos
- Mandatory welcome orientation
- Pre-PQP, an advisor dependent preliminary course to review important cultural topics
- PQP, a course to discuss project work and further cultural aspects
- ID2050, a social science course used to form teams and project proposals
- Some programs require language trainings
- A mandatory pre-departure orientation to go over all further policies, travel, documentations, and procedures
- Some sites offer additional on site preparation through a meeting with local community members

Dickinson

**Rank
#11**

- Strong language preparations - specific to certain programs
- A handbook for each program is given to outline the details of the experience
- A mandatory study abroad prep session is used to establish the health and safety while abroad
- Mandatory pre-departure session(s) are used to go over any further information with students

Syracuse

**Rank
#19**

- Students are offered information through online resources
- Health and Safety, packing, travel, and course information and requirements are all available online
- A mandatory pre-departure webinar is used to provide students with all the additional information for the program including school policies, housing, and further health and safety.

Bucknell

**Rank
#20**

- Students are offered all information through online resources
- Students are required to attend a pre-departure orientation to further explain all of the policies of the program

Figure 1: Preparations offered by Institutions chosen from the Princeton Review: Top 20 Study Abroad Programs (2017).

At many institutions, there are various institutional preparations made to provide a successful study abroad program. The first universal preparation, or requirement, is proper health and legal preparations prior to leaving the country (“Responsible Study Abroad: Good Practices for Health and Safety”, 2018). These requirements vary between programs and can also greatly depend on the destination. Health requirements usually consist of things such as immunizations and health insurance. The International Student Exchange Program requires students to enroll in their health insurance plan when studying internationally (“ISEP Student Health Insurance”, 2018). Being prepared for unforeseen emergencies when in another country is extremely important and most programs are successful in providing or requiring the proper healthcare.

Also dependent on program and location, students may be required to undergo language training prior to departure. Having familiarity with the local language(s) can significantly assist students to engage and function when they travel abroad (Gilmore, 2007). Providence College, for example, requires that students pass a French language placement test before being admitted to study in France. In addition, Global Studies majors must have passed four college level Spanish courses prior to studying in a Spanish speaking country (“Study Abroad Eligibility”, 2018). Other programs develop onsite language training courses as opposed to relying solely on pre-departure methods. While it is not a university study abroad program, the Peace Corps does prepare Americans to serve as cultural ambassadors in various locations around the globe. Peace Corps provides a mandatory, three month of language (and skills) development as part of initial onsite pre-service training in country (“Preparation and Training”, 2018).

Some programs also include a set of mandatory preparatory methods that provide additional resources to aid in the introduction to a country or context. It is also common to see the use of pre-departure orientations as a main preparatory stage. Students also have a variety of resources accessible to them, including other students who have travelled, published travel and scholarly texts, workshops or preparatory seminars provided by the individual programs, and the Internet.

The one form of preparation that was not present among most programs listed in Figure 1 is the use of on-site orientations along with the use of certain early preparation methods that can be seen at Goucher College, WPI, and other long-term programs like the Peace Corps. In-person pre-departure trainings or orientations are commonly used to prepare students for travel and engagements. Nearly every single one of these programs mentioned above, uses a pre-departure orientation in order to ultimately prepare students to go abroad. This trend shares different forms such as whether it was online or in person, but ultimately showed similarity throughout, in context of material, mostly consisting of the necessities of travel, program policies, and other travel requirements such as passports, packing, and travel plans.

Study abroad programs also appear increasingly reliant on web-based training programs. These trainings can vary in intensity and content but all share the common

goal to provide students with additional resources. The Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE) program uses a set of online preparatory courses to offer participants some basic preparations prior to departure. These courses consist of an online pre-departure orientation, a “Know Before You Go” course, or a series of smaller orientations that depend on the project site (“Program Terms and Conditions”, 2018). By contrast, the Wisconsin School of Business offers resources such as articles and links to websites that offer an individual the opportunity to engage with additional information if desired (Wisconsin School of Business: Pre-departure Resources, 2018). This trend was also seen in almost every one of the Princeton Review results in which each program, excluding Marist University, shows some form of online resource or workshop that aids in individual research.

Finally, some programs offer an additional onsite preparation for students. The *Youth for Understanding: Intercultural Exchange Program* holds an onsite orientation that covers appropriate behaviors and ways to adapt (“Post Arrival”, 2016). As mentioned previously, the Peace Corps offers a pre-service, onsite training for volunteers. This training “covers technical, linguistic, intercultural competency, diversity and inclusion, health, and safety and security topics” (“Preparation and Training”, 2018). At WPI, it is not common for programs to participate in this method of preparation but a few, including the Cape Town Project Center, choose to have a local member of the community visit with students upon arrival to Cape Town. It is then that students are reminded of the things they were told about in Pre-PQP, orientations, and ID2050.

Of the schools in the Figure 1, many do not provide extensive early preparations, with the exception of both WPI and Hobart and William Smith College (#1 ranked). Some WPI Project Centers offer certain courses prior to departure in order to provide students more information on the history and culture of their destinations. Hobart and William Smith College makes these pre-departure courses mandatory.

The Worcester Polytechnic Institute Global Studies Program: Preparing Students for Their Interactive Qualifying Project

According to the WPI Project Based Learning website, since 1970, project-based learning has been the core of the undergraduate curriculum. The professional and social context offered by project work is integrated across the curriculum and through all four years. The project-based learning approach offers students the opportunity to engage closely with faculty and fellow students to solve real-world problems in communities around the globe. The aim of this structure is to master critical thinking, sharpen research skills, fine-tune communication skills, and implement the school motto – Theory and Practice (“Project Based Learning at WPI”, 2018).

This system of learning has proven to be a meaningful and beneficial style of studying abroad. In 2013, results of an extensive study of the effects of the project-based learning approach on the professional abilities and worldviews of WPI students offered evidence of the value of the approach (“WPI Alumni Survey Reveals Powerful Impact of Project-Based Learning on Professional Skills, Abilities, and World Views”, 2013). In total, 2,526 surveys were collected from WPI alumni from the classes of 1974 through 2011, with an additional 20 in-depth interviews conducted to further expand on insights regarding the benefits of the approach. The study reported high levels of the following: professional abilities, including taking responsibility for their learning; developing ideals, solving problems, and understanding ethical responsibilities; interpersonal and communication skills, including effective leadership and team work; management of interpersonal dynamics and effective professional interactions; professional advancement; worldviews such as understanding connections between technology and society, an awareness of how decisions impact others, an awareness of global issues; and personal effects such as developing a stronger character, achieving work/life balance, and having their lives enriched in non-academic ways. At WPI, project-based learning is not limited to international engagements, or study abroad. As noted by Richard F. Vaz, Director the Center for Project-Based Learning at WPI, “The results of this study, along with our own decades of experience, indicates that giving students a social context in which they can apply what they have learned has enormous benefit to them in life, both professional and personal” (Vaz, “WPI Alumni Survey Reveals Powerful Impact of Project-based Learning on Professional Skills, Abilities, and World Views”, 2013).

The Interactive Qualifying Project (IQP) is an integral part of project based learning at WPI. The IQP is a project that all students are required to complete, generally occurring during their third, or junior year. The IQP involves three credits of (ideally) teamwork on an issue identified by a sponsoring stakeholder. Students can complete these projects on campus, or at over 40 project centers in six continents around the world. The first project center opened in 1974 in Washington, DC. If the IQP is completed on campus, the credits can be spread out over a longer time of three terms, but students traveling off campus complete the entire requirement during a single seven-week term.

Students are increasingly drawn to international engagements. In 2017, 78% of students completed their IQP internationally while the remaining 22% completed their IQP domestically, at sites across the country such as Washington, D.C., Bar Harbor, Maine, Boston, Massachusetts, and even locally in Worcester, Massachusetts (Bell, 2017). The popularity also is expected to increase as of 2022 when all students will be offered a \$5,000 scholarship for their IQP, potentially further increasing the number of students who will opt to travel internationally (“Global Projects Program”, 2018). Students also have the opportunity to study abroad outside of the IQP, opting to either study abroad for their Major Qualifying Project (MQP) or for a humanities program (“Global Projects Program”, 2018).

WPI offers formal preparations as part of the Global Program. At WPI these same basic health requirements remain generally identical. The school requires a medical release form, a health care provider form, and a disability disclosure form that need to be filled out by both the student and their doctor (“Health, Safety, and Security Off-campus”, 2018). Some programs have specific requirements regarding health insurance coverage for students traveling abroad. Also WPI health insurance is provided for all students through the school’s insurance partnership, United Healthcare Global. This insurance package is comprehensive, in that it covers all types of medical visits while abroad, from one-time clinic visits to hospitalization. Proof of an existing health care plan is not mandatory (Worcester Polytechnic Institute Business Travel Welcome Kit, 2014). Other things like vaccinations are location-based. For example, students were required to speak with a physician to discuss the necessary precautions needed in the specific project center locations (Bell, personal communication, 2018).

Language skills at WPI when studying abroad are not required for most project center locations. However, certain centers feel that students are more successful if they possess and maintain some existing language skills, such as project centers in Paraguay, Ecuador, and Costa Rica, while some offer some rudimentary language training prior to departure (including Thailand, Albania, and Morocco) (Bell, 2017).

At WPI, students are required to participate in a mandatory welcome orientation two terms prior to the time students will be leaving to study abroad. During this orientation students are given information that explains things such as required immunizations that are project site dependent, suggested courses and course loads, registration, and all of the school policies the institution wishes to be outlined such as drugs and alcohol policies. This meeting runs for about an hour and is a way for students to start preparing for the trip ahead. A pre-departure orientation is then held for all students going to their project center the following term. This is a three hour orientation that is split into two sections. One section is a sexual assault awareness presentation that is uniform among all of the project sites. It is during this orientation where students learn how to remain safe and aware while studying abroad. A second part is a site-specific orientation. The material covered during this orientation varies from site to site but all include material such as reminders of expectations and packing essentials including extra cash or an additional credit card. Many orientation sessions include a scenario-based presentation where different types of potential scenarios are evaluated, and precautions and solutions are discussed. After that, a group contract is signed and the remaining site specifics are presented.

Additional preparations that WPI offers alongside universal preparations are mentioned below. The first preparation that is offered to students is the Global Fair, where students are given the opportunity to explore the many project center options offered for their IQP. WPI also has an application process that includes both site session videos and an essay topic, which further push students to do further preparation and

research. Finally, there may be some preliminary coursework, including weekly discussions, online engagements, or assigned readings that allow students to learn about the culture and history of their project centers. An overview of these stages is provided in Figure 2.

Given that WPI students are engaging the project-based learning when traveling abroad, students complete a preparation course prior to departure. The course, *ID 2050: Social Science Methods for the IQP*, offers students an opportunity to learn more about the country of destination as they develop project proposals for onsite work. These project proposals must be contextualized, and as such, require research to be conducted on the society, culture, economy and politics of the country or region. Dependent on the project center and the course instructor, more attention may be paid to intercultural preparations, with dedicated time spent on history, language, and culture but is intentionally inconsistent across project centers and instructors.

While WPI makes a concerted effort to ensure students are prepared for their international engagements, there has been no formal assessment of the effectiveness of these efforts. Finally, it remains unclear how much, if any, additional effort students make to inform themselves of their project center and what to expect while they are there. It is possible that WPI provides students with too many resources and as such students no longer feel any need to be proactive in their own preparations. This project aims to offer some insights on the preparations of students going to Cape Town, as a first step in formally considering WPI's preparation efforts.

Additional WPI Preparations

Global Fair

The Global Fair is an optional program that is offered to students, regularly sophomore sophomores, in which participants interact with project center directors and alumni in order to gain a better understanding of the study abroad options offered at WPI. Some additional resources are offered and are listed below.



Photo Booth
Here students are able to get their passport photo taken if they have not already done so

Financial Aid Booth
Students have access to information about financial obligations along with details on some of the resources the WPI offers for financial assistance



Health Services
Students have access to information on certain health requirements while abroad such as vaccinations and immunizations. They are also offered tips and precautions to stay healthy.

Residential Services
Here a representative offers details on housing and other living situations while at their project center



Application Process



Site Session Videos

- The application process has a site session video requirement.
- Students are required to view all project site videos that they wish to apply to.
- Each video is approximately five minutes in length.
- Each video includes details about the project center site, housing, and project options.



Student Essay

- Students are required to write an essay
- Essay prompts change every year but students are routinely asked to consider:
 1. *Why they want to participate at a specific project center?*
 2. *What about the project center interests them and why?*
- It is expected that students will have done adequate research before responding

Pre-PQP

This is a preliminary course that is advisor dependent, in which advisors may choose to offer this course as a resource in order to inform students on important aspects of their specific project center.

History
During this course professors may choose to teach topics about project center history while using assigned reading and writing to keep students engaged



Culture
Advisors often include topics on popular culture and aspects of everyday life in their specific project center. Current events and news articles are common resources that are used.



Figure 2: Additional WPI Resources: The Global Fair, Application Process, and Pre-PQP

METHODS

This project aimed to explore the expectations and assumptions held by students about their preparations during the selection process, during ID2050, and while they were in Cape Town in order to provide institutional and independent recommendations to better prepare students. To obtain data on student expectations and assumptions, I conducted focus group discussions, group interviews, and developed and deployed a survey. Given the multiple stages of formal preparations undertaken at WPI, I engaged students at different stages of the formal preparation, including sophomores initially beginning their preparation, juniors in the process of project planning, and seniors who had completed their IQP and could reflect on that experience. The research primarily focused on the Cape Town Project Center, the project center where I was accepted, completed initial preparations, and engaged briefly before a medical emergency terminated my experience.

A set of research questions guided my data collection:

- 1. In what ways did the institutional efforts prepare students for an international IQP?**
- 2. What personal efforts did students make to prepare for their engagements abroad?**
- 3. In reflection, do students feel that the formal/informal preparations were adequate in addressing their expectations and assumptions of their IQP abroad?**

Survey:

In order to assess sophomore students' engagements with formal (WPI sponsored) and informal activities to prepare for their IQP experience, I created a survey. The survey targeted questions towards preparations and resource utilization during the stages of IQP selection (see Appendix 1). This was an effective method to obtain a wide range of data, quickly. This also allowed for me to observe the effectiveness and participation rate of the formal efforts that students are offered during the selection process, providing results to research Question 1. I gained insight on some of the personal efforts made by students during the beginning stages of IQP, giving insight on research Question 2. However, the survey was not limited to students only interested in the Cape Town Project Center and as such includes the varied opinions of students interested in both international and local IQP sites. The student survey was sent out via the sophomore student list. There are currently 1,063 sophomore students enrolled at WPI (WPI 2017 Fact Book, 2017) and of those students, 69 students chose to participate. Though having benefits to the type of

information I needed, there are the drawbacks of participation bias (possibly only students very involved in the process opted to participate) and self-report bias (students may have over-reported their engagement). The data collected were analyzed using frequencies to recognize common trends, themes, and participation rates.

Group Discussion:

In order to assess the secondary process of formal preparations, ID2050 and orientations, as well as the additional preparations (pre-PQP) conducted for Cape Town, I engaged juniors in a group discussion. This discussion took place during the Cape Town 2017 ID2050 course, with 25 students preparing to leave for Cape Town the following B term. A question guide can be found in Appendix 2. By performing a group interview, I was able to target specific topics, obtaining both individual and shared opinions. I was also able to gain insight on how the formal institutional preparations and resources impacted students who were deeper into the IQP experience, offering insight on research Question 1. By that point in their experience, students had participated in a pre-PQP course and had access to additional resources offered by both the school and the advisors. There was also the factor that students were now fully aware of their IQP project center destination and had additional time to make extensive personal efforts to prepare. The discussion was informal and open-ended, which allowed students to express their feelings on the upcoming experience and consider the preparations they had made for their experience, answering research Question 2. Text analysis was used to recognize trends.

Focus Groups:

Finally, I assessed former Cape Town Project Center students (current seniors), regarding the perceived adequacy of the preparations they undertook. I conducted two focus group discussions, each with five individuals. Focus group members were carefully selected based on their personalities, in an effort to create a group dynamic that involved some level of discord for greater discussion. The questions used for the focus group discussions are included in Appendix 3. This format allowed me to observe student's experiences while abroad. Students were asked questions that would trigger responses on the levels of preparations that they felt were either inadequate or proficient (research Question 3). Both focus groups also primarily involved discussions of the formal preparations students undertook prior to their departure (research Question 2). The data was then analyzed through text analysis where common trends and themes were identified. Participation consent was obtained from all students, as seen in Appendix 3.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The nature of study abroad creates different stages of preparation, from early in the selection process, to ID2050, and finally arrival at the project center. By interacting with student at each stage of the process, I was able to retrieve insight on the extensiveness of the preparations taken both independently and collectively alongside program requirements. With this insight I was able to observe common trends and make suggestions and recommendations to WPI for future programs.

Sophomore Survey

The sophomore survey was a key factor in providing insight on the preparations taken at the initial preparation stage. The survey consisted of 69 participants who had just applied to the Global Program for their desired IQP Project Center. From the students in the sophomore class who completed the survey, 64 of the 69 (92.6%) went to the Global Fair offered to students during early A-term (see Figure 1). Due to this high percentage of attendance, a majority of students believe that the Global Fair is a valuable resource to retrieve the initial details of the study abroad project centers. Although I did not ask for reasons why students did not attend the event, possible explanations for their absence may relate to the possibilities that the students may either not want to study abroad or may simply have been unaware of the event. Along with the participation rate, students were asked whether they prepared for the event. From this it was found that 13.04% of respondents talked to students who had completed their IQP in order to prepare, and 63.77% of participants chose to explore the different project center sites. A major drawback to this trend is that many project centers do not have a website that students can openly view. The remaining responses, 5.80%, chose to not prepare, did both, or went as freshman.

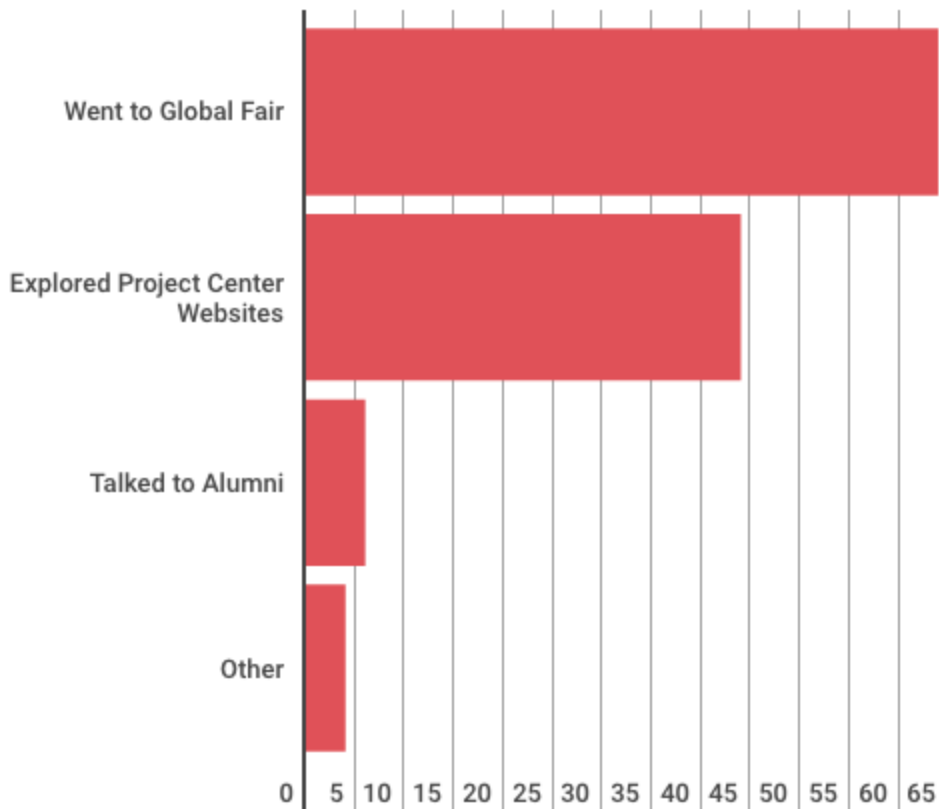


Figure 3: Number of students who attended, spoke to alumni, visited project center websites, or other methods of preparation

Along with the individual preparations of students for the Global Fair, there were also many resources that were provided during this event. Despite the abundance and benefits of the many resources (see Figure 4) less than half of the students, 47.83%, took advantage of them. In fact, from the long list of resources offered, only 7.25% went to the Global Café, 7.25% had their passport photo taken, 13.04% spoke with the financial aid office, 5.80% spoke with residential services, 5.80% spoke with the International Studies Program, 2.90% took advantage of the health center, and only 5.80% spoke with the career development center (see Figure 4). In addition to the one day Global Fair, the Global Program routinely provided opportunities for students to ask questions through multiple student center table sitting sessions offered throughout A term. Similar to that of the resources offered at the Global Fair, only 14.5% of students completing the survey indicated that they had taken advantage of the Global Program’s informational table in the student center.

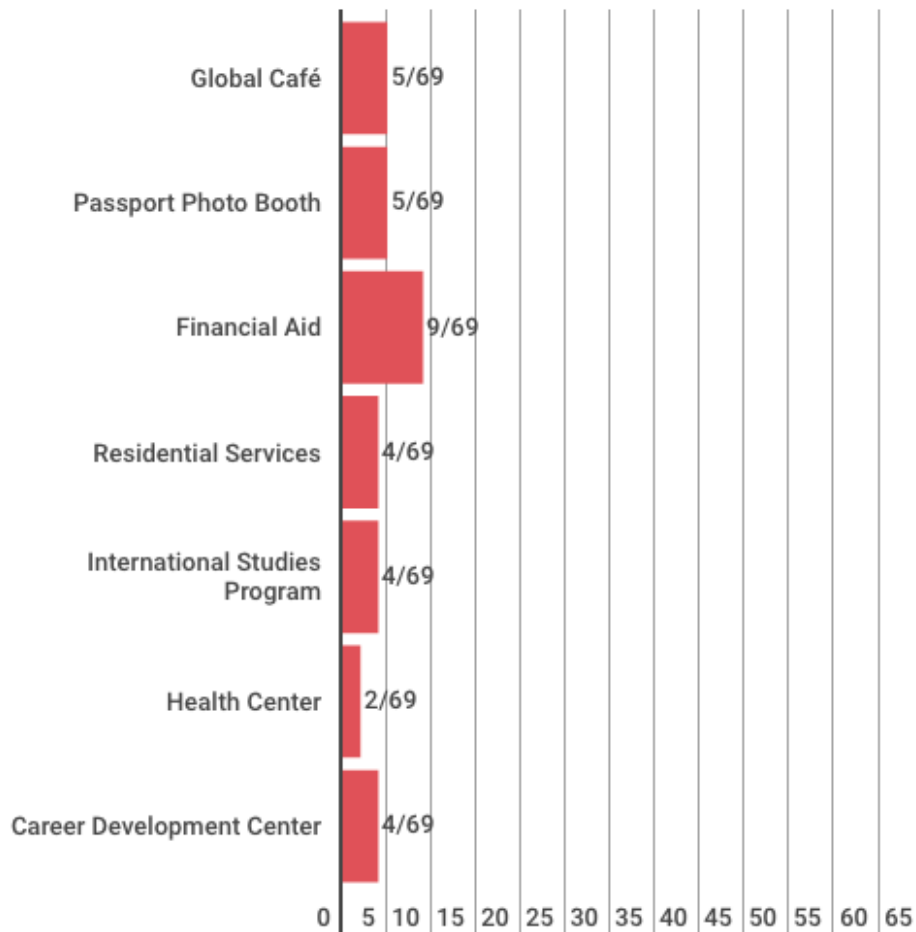


Figure 4: Number of students who took advantage of the resources offered

Another way that students often learn about project centers is to speak to former students on the details of the experience. Of the sophomores responding to the survey, 65.22% of students indicated that they spoke to other students about their experiences. It is also found that many students chose exclusively to speak to other students that they were familiar with (28.99%) as opposed to those who spoke exclusively to students they do not know (11.59%). Due to the increasing popularity of doing IQP internationally, students proportionally have more access to former students from a variety of project centers. Therefore, it is likely that students realized other students as an important source to attain basic information on the different project centers.

Some project centers also offer websites that allow students to view content that previous groups have done as well as some of the details of the experiences of students. Of the project sites that do offer a project center website, a vast majority (77.10%) of survey participants chose to explore the project center website as a resource to prepare for their IQP selection. Also, according to the survey results, students explored multiple

websites, approximately 1.5 websites per person. The high frequency also may be related to the ease of access of these resources.

Finally, when students were asked the different forms of independent outside research, results indicate a clear lack of personal preparation. When asked about specific additional sources of research, 16.92% chose to reach out to the project center directors, while 6.56% met with the advisors personally and 1.61% went to the final project presentations of the previous groups. This trend can also be seen when it comes to students doing their own outside research. When students were asked about the extent of outside research on their project centers, 20.08% of students did research on the location. Students indicated lower engagement with current news from a project center location, weather, food, languages, outside activities, and history (see Figure 5).

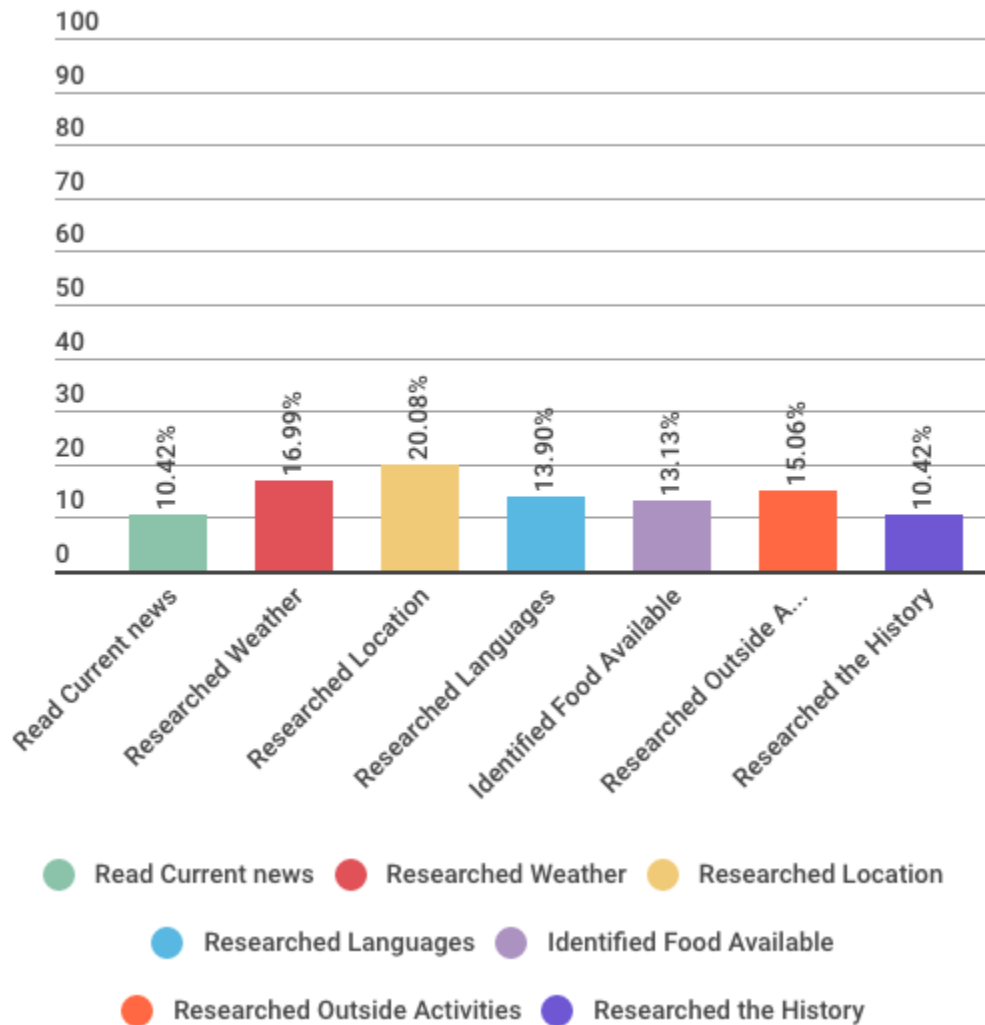


Figure 5: Independent research engagement for different subject areas

The survey results reveal that many students completed all of the initial mandatory steps to prepare for their study abroad experience such as attending the Global Fair as well as watching the project center site videos. However, the majority of students did not take any additional steps to prepare independently outside of the required institutional preparations. With such a low participation rate, it can be argued that students simply do not feel the obligation to do additional extensive preparations to better their study abroad experience. This can partly be a consequence of the resource awareness that the school provides for students, which should allow further self-preparation. Although, an argument can also be made that students are simply aware of such resources, but are not willing to make the extra effort to take advantage of these resources.

Junior Group Discussion

The group discussion was a valuable method to extract the different assumptions and expectations of the junior students that were about to depart to South Africa. This method provided feedback on the different preparations that they had made alongside the additional required preparations of the institutions. Students were able to reflect on specific questions regarding their preparation, while also reflecting on the adequacy of each throughout different levels of the process such as the selection process, early self-driven preparations, pre-PQP, and ID2050. Results are outlined in Figure 6.

Selection Process

Here students were first asked to provide feedback on the many things that influenced them during the project selection process.



- Alumni played a major role in selection
- Students were able to ask specific questions on experience
- Familiar alumni (through fraternities, sororities, and friendships) were able to express the realities of the experience through the eyes of a student
- Students also found that the project options were also extremely important

Self Preparation

Students were asked about their methods of preparation for ID2050 and the project center



- Students did not do outside research of their own
- Some did research on topics about the location such as outside activities and other travel plans
- Students did not take advantage of resources offered including texts offered by the advisors
- Students felt that there was no preparation that would impact the workload of ID2050

Figure 6: Results to questions about the selection process and self-preparations

Students were first asked to provide feedback on the many things that influenced them during the project selection process while also reflecting on the self-preparations they made as individuals. The junior class openly expressed that the major component of their selection process was the feedback they had received from former students of the project center. This is similar to the survey results in which students uniformly share alumni interactions as a major resource to student preparation. These interactions are more commonly seen among students who had pre-existing relationships to other students who went abroad, also corresponding with results seen from the survey. As WPI is growing in study abroad participation, the likelihood of knowing an individual who has studied abroad increases. Therefore interactions with other students are more easily accessible while also providing first hand feedback on what to expect and to prepare for.

Similar results can be seen in other aspects of self-preparation. For example, when questioned on outside preparation, students openly admitted that their outside research was extremely limited. This was especially proven in talking about the many resources that Cape Town Project Center Director, Nicola Bulled, offered in D term, and the summer prior to their ID2050 course. Of the texts and resources offered to students over the summer, students admitted that they had initial intentions to read them but ended up ultimately forgetting or opting not to. This correlates directly to the survey results in which students do not take the additional steps to prepare themselves even when the resources are presented. This finding highlights the major issue of self-driven preparation in which students opt to do only what is required of them.

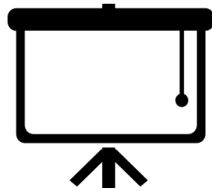
Pre-PQP



Students were questioned on their experiences during their pre-PQP experience

- Meeting the other students going on the trip was significant to all students
- Hearing real life examples of both the activities and the projects was meaningful
- Readings provided insight on the culture and history
- Students were informed on important early preparations for travel and ID2050

ID2050



Students were asked about the preparations taken for this social science course. They were asked to reflect on their expectations for the project ahead.

- Students were informed of the rigorous course load, therefore expected the amount of work, but did not think any further prep was needed to prepare for it
- The focus was on their projects, no focus on further cultural preparation
- Students felt ready for their projects as they put all of the focus in this area

Figure 7: Results for group discussion when asked about pre-PQP and ID2050

The pre-PQP experiences of the students were also explored during this discussion, which offered information related to the effectiveness and adequacy of the process. During this group's pre-PQP, students were required to do weekly readings followed by reflections of each. From these readings and assignments, students showed high levels of enthusiasm towards the importance that they played. Students also claimed that it was extremely beneficial to grasp the initial understandings of the culture and the experience that lies ahead. Students also expressed enthusiasm to be able to meet the former students of the Cape Town Project Center who presented on topics during pre-PQP. For example, many students expressed that the former students were very valuable in making students feel more prepared and excited for the experience due to hearing real life scenarios from primary sources, further emphasizing the importance of peer relations. It was also found that the readings and texts were valuable in providing a background for students and their experience ahead. This shows the value in additional preparations but also outlines the lack of student self-driven preparation as it was shown above that students only partook in these additional resources because they were mandatory.

Another aspect that was discussed with students was their current experiences in ID2050 and how prepared they felt for the next step. Student feedback revolved around the projects themselves, discussing how significant work was put into the project and their willingness to execute. Although this is important to the process of IQP, students did not express any further debate on how ready they felt for the culture or the overall experience ahead. A minimizing of cultural preparedness can be tied to the way students

learn at WPI in which the majority of focus is the IQP project and they often leave out the other important aspects of studying abroad, like experiencing living in a different country and culture.

Senior Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted in order to explore the seniors' experiences and different levels of preparation. From the two groups, I was able to get valuable feedback on the different levels of preparations that students took part in and whether they were adequately prepared both by the school and individually.

The results of these discussions are very similar to those of the junior group discussion while also gaining a deeper level of understanding, as the seniors had already completed the process. The initial interactions were aimed to bring students back to their pre-PQP and some of the early preparation experiences. Various results on this topic were recorded, in which some students showed discord with structure and content of the preliminary course. In 2016, the pre-PQP meetings were at 7:00 AM, where students would meet once a week in a classroom setting. This was claimed to have been a major drawback in which students were too tired to have the energy to discuss certain topics with students they had not quite become familiar with. Another drawback that was expressed was absence of the project director, Nicola Bulled, as she was advising another IQP project center during that time.

The content of these sessions was widely on current events and other historical and cultural aspects of the project center, which almost every student claimed to have received benefits. Students claimed that it was a necessity to the process in which students felt "less of a disconnect from the local population." Although there were discrepancies between the students' opinions on the structure of the pre-PQP as it was the first time it had been offered for the Cape Town Project Center, it was uniformly decided that pre-PQP proved to be a valuable resource to student preparation. In 2017, the pre-PQP was held later in the day, and although the center director was present, it primarily involved discussions led by former students. In the 2016 group, students did not believe some of the readings from books to be very helpful, though many students supported the use of the news and current events. To address this feedback, in 2017 the center director limited the readings to short published journal articles and current news events.

To conclude the conversation, students were asked whether they felt adequately prepared for the experience. Students first made claims that the pre-departure orientations organized and run by Global Programs staff were not really beneficial in preparing students, as many of the details and scenarios that were presented were not expressing the severity of each. According to the group, being fully aware of the reality of things is what prepared students the most, many students felt as if while in these orientations it was "putting paper over cracks" and not fully showing the truth behind the reality. Students

instead unanimously said that the most beneficial method to achieve this feeling of severity and reality was the on-site discussion with a local. This on-site session was held at the student housing on the first day of arrival. The advisors decided to invite one of the sponsors that would be working closely with one of our groups to discuss the nature of the experiences ahead. Students listened more closely to the same expectations taught by the advisors in the previous term when it came from the mouth of someone who was a local and lived through many of the situations that could be faced while in Cape Town.

CONCLUSION

Using my research questions and the results of my research methods, I was able to make conclusions about the level of preparation students have prior to their IQP experiences. From these findings I conclude with the following recommendations:

1. Students need to actively engage in more self-driven preparation.

Students were found to lack individual self-driven preparations for every level of the process. Further focus on outlining the importance of this concept should be incorporated into the process by the institution. This self-preparation should be encouraged prior to the Global Fair. Students should first understand all of the resources that are offered and the importance of taking advantage of each. Also, it should be expressed that the importance of self-preparation only increases upon project selection and being accepted to a program. Further preparations for any pre-PQP, PQP, or ID2050 courses should be encouraged. These further preparations should outline the importance of preparing for both the project AND the experience. Students proved to lack recognition of the importance of cultural preparation to enhance their global IQP experience. Finally, students also need to be reminded of these same things prior to departure, as it is often lost in the process. Students need to continue their research and preparations when departure nears.

2. WPI should make specific early preparations mandatory among international project centers (Pre-PQP or required online reading).

Early preparations methods have been observed to consist of either pre-PQP or additional readings at WPI and these two implementations are not very common. The Cape Town project center uses a structured pre-PQP to help prepare students for the culture and everyday life of the country. This has been observed to be beneficial to both the juniors and seniors, and is outlined as one of the most important courses for student preparation. Making pre-PQP courses more common among project centers and programs will further increase the success of student preparedness when they study abroad. The procedures and structures of this course may be left up to the advisor, but should be greatly encouraged by the institute to contain important information of all of the aspects of the experience ahead, including both aspects of cultural and project work. For other programs that do not wish to use a pre-PQP as prep, additional resources to further prepare students should be provided. Participation in pre-departure preparation should be mandatory, as it is found that students do not take initiative to prepare individually. To better influence students to take this initiative it is also recommended to include former students into the experience. It was found that peer interactions were a significant

factor in making students feel more prepared for their study abroad experience. Therefore, by including early interactions with former students, new participants will feel more prepared in the long-run after hearing it from primary sources.

3. WPI should make specific post-arrival preparations mandatory among all international project centers.

Another method that the Cape Town Project Center uses is the post-arrival meeting in which a local community member, sponsor, or community official visits and expresses the important information to know about safety, community, and culture. This was emphasized as one of the most important things for students to get a sense of reality for the experience ahead, as it comes from someone who is immersed in the culture daily. As a result, it should be mandatory to host some sort of post-arrival meeting or seminar to remind students of all of the things they were warned prior. As mentioned above, important preparations that were made or discussed are often lost in the excitement of arrival. Therefore it is important to ground students and provide a sense of reality to the situation. This will help students remain safe and aware of the experiences ahead.

In providing focus in these areas, students will consequently be better prepared for the study abroad experience while ultimately grasping the true nature of the experience.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Sophomore survey email and questions

Dear Students:

We would like to ask you for your help. One of your fellow students, Alden Graham, is exploring how students prepare for their IQP experiences. He is interested in what efforts you took to inform yourself of the different Project Center opportunities. He has also been engaging with students currently taking ID2050 (Juniors) and those who have already completed their experiences (Seniors).

This message contains a link to a short survey that he has developed. The survey contains 13 short questions and should take less than 5 minutes to complete. Many of the questions are quite simple and can be answered very quickly. A link to the survey instrument is here:

[Link to the survey instrument](#)

Be assured that there are no sensitive or revealing questions. Moreover, WPI's Qualtrics software has been directed not to collect the e-mail and/or IP addresses of survey participants, and the survey does not ask for identifying information. Your answers will in no way influence your participation in the Global Program. Alden will make the final aggregate results available to the WPI community as part of his final IQP report.

If you have any questions about this project, or would like to speak to Alden directly, please contact him at atgraham@wpi.edu.

Sincerely,

*Professor Nicola Bulled
Professor Alexandrina Agloro*

THIS SURVEY IS FOR EVALUATION PURPOSES ONLY. ALL ANSWERS WILL BE ANONYMOUS AND IMPARTIAL TO THE IQP SELECTION PROCESS.

1. Did you attend the Global Fair? Y/N
2. Did you do anything to prepare for the Global Fair?

- Talk to alumni
- Look at Project Center Websites

3. Which Project Centers did you engage with at the Global Fair?

(Check all that apply)

- Asunción, Paraguay
- Bangkok, China
- Bar Harbor, ME
- Beijing, China
- Boston, MA
- Buenos Aires, Argentina
- Cape Town, South Africa
- Copenhagen, Denmark
- Cuenca, Ecuador
- Glacier National Park, MO
- Hangzhou, China
- Hong Kong, China
- Eilat, Israel
- Osaka, Japan
- London, UK
- Mandi, India
- Massachusetts Water Resource Outreach Center
- Melbourne, Australia
- Monteverde, Costa Rica
- San Jose, Costa Rica
- Moscow, Russia
- Nantucket, MA
- Panama City, Panama
- Morocco
- San Juan, Puerto Rico
- Sante Fe, New Mexico
- Switzerland
- Thessaloniki, Greece
- Tirana, Albania
- Venice, Italy
- Washington, DC
- Wellington, New Zealand
- Windhoek, Namibia
- Worcester, MA
- Worcester, England

- Yerevan, Armenia

4. Did you take advantage of any of the other services offered at the Global Fair? (Check all that apply)

- Passport photo taken
- Global Café – conversations with juniors/IQP alumni
- Financial Aid
- Residential Services
- International Studies Program
- Health Center
- Career Development Center

5. In determining which Project Center to apply to, which Project Center informational video(s) did you watch? (Check all that apply)

- Asuncion, Paraguay
- Bangkok, China
- Bar Harbor, ME
- Beijing, China
- Boston, MA
- Buenos Aires, Argentina
- Cape Town, South Africa
- Copenhagen, Denmark
- Cuenca, Ecuador
- Glacier National Park, MO
- Hangzhou, China
- Hong Kong, China
- Eilat, Israel
- Osaka, Japan
- London, UK
- Mandi, India
- Massachusetts Water Resource Outreach Center
- Melbourne, Australia
- Monteverde, Costa Rica
- San Jose, Costa Rica
- Moscow, Russia
- Nantucket, MA
- Panama City, Panama
- Morocco
- San Juan, Puerto Rico
- Sante Fe, New Mexico

- Switzerland
- Thessaloniki, Greece
- Tirana, Albania
- Venice, Italy
- Washington, DC
- Wellington, New Zealand
- Windhoek, Namibia
- Worcester, MA
- Worcester, England
- Yerevan, Armenia

6. Did you visit any of the of the Project Center websites? (Check all that apply.)

- Bangkok, China
- Bar Harbor, ME
- Cape Town, South Africa
- London
- Massachusetts Water Resource Outreach Center
- Melbourne, Australia
- Nantucket, MA
- Panama City, Panama
- Venice, Italy
- Washington, DC
- Worcester, MA

7. Did you email any Project Center Directors? Y/N

a. If so, list those you emailed: _____

8. Did you meet with any Project Center Directors? Y/N

a. If so, list those you met with: _____

9. Did you attend the final project proposal presentations for any Project Center?Y/N

10. Did you speak with former alumni? Y/N

11. If yes, were they familiar to you or newly met? Familiar/new

12. Did you do outside research on the project center? (Check all that apply.)

- Read current news
- Weather at Project Center during IQP term
- Location of Project Center

- Languages spoken at Project Center
- Food to eat at Project Center
- Things to do at Project Center
- Read history book of Project Center country or location

13. Through these resources, are you confident in your understanding of expectations of your first/top choice Project Center? Briefly explain why

Appendix 2: Group discussion with Junior Cape Town project center students

Hi, I am Alden Graham, a student here at WPI. I am conducting research exploring the IQP experience and your preparation for that experience. I would like to take 30 minutes of your time to talk to you about your experiences to date. This group discussion is confidential; I will record no identifiers and will not utilize your name in any concluding reports. I will be taking notes, but will not be audio recording this conversation.

What made you finally decide which IQPs you wanted?

- From friends? For the project? The advisor? The projects?

How did your friends influence your IQP choice?

What did IGSD offer to you to prepare you?

What were the recommended steps to prepare you to go beyond pre-PQP?

What did you do on your own outside of WPI orientations and pre-PQP, to prepare to go?

Did you feel prepared starting your project?

What are the expectations of Cape Town?

Appendix 3: Focus group discussion questions

Did you feel prepared starting your project?

What did IGSD offer to you to prepare you?

What were the recommended steps to prepare you to go beyond pre-PQP?

What did you do on your own outside of WPI orientations to prepare to go?

What are some of the key elements that influenced your willingness to prepare for IQP?

- How did the project choice influence your effort in preparation?

- How did your group partners influence your effort preparation?

What were some of the key elements that influenced your preparedness for Cape Town? (Places you wanted to go, restaurants, excursions, past IQP advice?)

What were the expectations of Cape Town?

What did you find once there?

Has this experience altered how you're prepared to travel now?

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