



Developing Sustainable Education Abroad Programs

adapted from JMU's "Greening Study Abroad" draft document by Jennifer Coffman and Taryn Roberts

The International Studies Office, in collaboration with UVA's Office of Sustainability developed its own internal [Sustainability Plan](#) in February 2020. The plan, developed in alignment with [UVA's sustainability goals](#), focuses on action and education regarding sustainability both within the office itself and through its programming on and off-Grounds.

Every year, approximately 3,000 UVA students participate in study abroad. Students who go abroad develop better problem-solving skills, are less risk-adverse, and display greater creativity. While international education via study abroad is considered a high impact learning practice, it is rightly critiqued as having high and negative impacts relating to sustainability. Study abroad, like travel in general, contributes to climate change. Transportation emissions, host fatigue and dependence, and economic disparities related to how wealth and power are controlled in study abroad sites are three of many issues connected to study abroad and sustainability.

Sustainability efforts in education abroad are most effective when meaningfully tied to all three pillars of sustainability: **environmental, socio-cultural, and economic**. Implementing all three pillars into study abroad programs provides limitless educational opportunities for students and for ourselves. While environmental sustainability may not be the focus of your program, most programs will have some connection to the three pillars of sustainability which are all interconnected. One resource to consider while planning your program is the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#); UNESCO has developed an [Education for Sustainable Development Goals: learning objectives](#) document which may also be helpful.

This document provides suggestions for ways to integrate sustainability into your program, including content and logistics. As you consider the suggestions below, think about the many points of connection you have with students before and during a program including: the course description on the program brochure, information session(s), pre-departure orientation, course assignments, lectures, excursions in-country, and others.

Planning/Pre-departure

What are the key sustainability issues in the region(s) you plan to visit? How can knowledge of these issues be incorporated to your program? How might you incorporate the UN Sustainable Development Goals into your program design and course content?

- Design your schedule to include readings, guest lectures, and/or visits that highlight sustainability issues in the region.
 - Plan for greener outings, engagements, and guest speakers. Network with faculty at local universities and invite them to guest lecture or co-plan eco-friendly excursions.

- Connect with local faculty, organizations, or non-profits to discuss current cultural and economic issues.
- Book direct flights whenever possible, and otherwise minimize the number of layovers.
- Plan to utilize public transportation with students while abroad. Budget for public transit passes so students can access these services independently.
- Consider accommodation that demonstrably integrates “green features,” such as green design, renewable energy and low GHG emissions, low waste and recycling when necessary, local sourcing for food and other products, locally owned and operated/staffed, investment in the local community. As part of its Sustainability Plan, the ISO will prioritize sustainable accommodation options where possible and cost-effective.
- Plan to educate students about their social and ecological responsibilities as travelers and about key environmental, cultural, and economic issues in your study abroad destination(s).
 - Include teaching and resources about your destination’s history, politics, current events, cultural groups, religions, etc. before and/or during your program.
- Plan to discuss with students their impacts on host families regarding sustainability. Encourage them to consider ways to reduce and offset those impacts (e.g., water and energy consumption, etc.), and invite them to actively seek out actions they might bring back home and implement.
- Consider [UVA’s sustainability goals](#) as well as the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#) and think about how you might integrate those into your program.

While Studying Abroad

- Use public transportation whenever possible, and if renting private vehicles, be thoughtful about numbers of people per vehicle and distances traveled. Avoid or minimize flights in-country. Limit fossil fuel consumption.
 - Teach students how to use public transportation in their host city.
 - Discuss with students or encourage them to observe how public and private transportation are utilized in the host city/country.
- Conserve water and electricity. Examples include taking short showers, only taking electronics that are necessary, unplugging as much as possible, limit use of air conditioning and heating, and turning off lights when leaving a room.
- Reduce consumption of bottled water. If traveling to areas where drinking water is easily available, encourage students to bring reusable water bottles.
 - If traveling to areas where tap water is not potable or available, purchase large bottles of high-quality drinking water in reusable bottles. These usually require a deposit, but the cycling of bottles will take care of itself quickly. If further afield, then consider a portable water purification system.
- Do not litter, regardless of what it seems others may do. Engage students in conversations around trash, recycling, and composting norms in the host country.
- When possible, purchase items that have minimal packaging.
- Purchase items that are made and/or sold by local vendors.
- Do not purchase products that may be made from rare or endangered plants, animals, or other resources. Discuss with students as relevant.
- Be conscientious of how much you buy.
- Bring and encourage students to bring reusable shopping bags.

- Unless it's part of the program, stay on the beaten path – do not go off-roading in a vehicle or tramping about on foot as many areas are highly sensitive to being trod upon.
- Eat local and minimally packaged foods as much as possible.
- When planning group meals, consider a vegetarian meal; decrease meat consumption.
- Build sustainable relationships with universities, organizations, and groups in your program's host community.
- Learn some basic phrases in your host community's language, including greetings. Be astute and adapt your body language appropriately to local customs.
- Photograph ethically. Seek consent before taking photos of people, including children.

Back at UVA

- Encourage students to integrate their abroad experiences – including their insights on sustainability – into independent studies, honors theses, and other coursework.
- Encourage students returning from abroad to engage with sustainability on Grounds, including environmental, socio-cultural, and economic efforts.
- Encourage students returning from abroad to help educate future study abroad students about the benefits of studying abroad “green.”
- Share with the ISO any photos, videos, or eco-friendly activities your group engaged with while abroad so these can be featured for next year's program.

Sustaining Your Program, and Yourself

- Think about the relationships with your host communities abroad. How can you manage host fatigue and/or host dependence (i.e. hosts relying on program for revenue so you feel you must visit annually)?
- Think about your experience directing your program. What do you need to do to support this program as well as your workload? How can you utilize existing resources so that directing this program is sustainable for you? Are there resources that you would like to see be developed by the ISO to support you and your program?
- How can you integrate your program experience into your scholarship of teaching and learning, with an abroad focus?
 - You can convert the richness of your knowledge into professional presentations, published work, grants, and other scholarly endeavors.

If you would like to discuss how to integrate sustainability into your program, please contact the ISO. The Education Abroad Advisor and operations team working with your program will be happy to explore options with you.