

ON LOCATION: A Study of Information Literacy in Short-Term Study Away Courses

Jennifer S. Beach*

INTRODUCTION

In 2016, Longwood University, located in Farmville, Virginia, began a new program of short-term study away courses which would travel within the continental United States, called the Brock Experiences. Since then, the program has evolved to require an alignment with the institution's general education program, which includes a requirement of information literacy as a student learning outcome in these courses. As the liaison librarian to the Brock Experiences, and as a member of our general education program committee, this author witnessed the struggle, and sometimes outright resistance of instructional faculty to including information literacy in short-term, study away courses, both in-country and abroad. This preliminary study was born of that witnessed struggle, with the goal of ascertaining the extent to which information literacy instruction, and academic library professionals in particular, are integrated into short-term study away programs

LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly literature on providing library services to study away students and courses trends toward three main categories. The first and most robust category pertains to library services to traditional study abroad programs and students. Academic library professionals have found value in creating general information web guides for students preparing for their study abroad programs, including providing logistical information for navigating a foreign country, as well as direct links to library resources (White, Ye, and Guccione, 2009¹). Academic library professionals have also found success in scheduling general information sessions for students and faculty before departure, particularly to make students aware of the library services and resources still available to them while they are abroad (Kutner, 2009²; and Denda 2013³). As the technology has become more readily available, academic library professionals are also encouraged to make research consultations available to students studying abroad using web conferencing software (Cohen and Burkhardt, 2010⁴). Making connections with students and faculty before courses depart, as well as providing library services to students studying away from their home institutions can help students maintain a connection with their university while easing the culture shock of travel.

For a greater impact on the traveling student, on both their acclimatization and their studies, academic library professionals should explore forging partnerships with study

*Jennifer S. Beach, *Research & Instructional Services Librarian, Longwood University,*
beachjs@longwood.edu

abroad programs or instructional faculty. The work of initiating partnerships and working to create formal liaison services between the library and global studies programs frequently falls to the academic library professionals and can yield successful outcomes (White, Ye, and Guccione, 2009⁵). Often students travel to destinations where access to reliable internet, and thus access to library electronic resources, are limited. Academic library professionals who are able to partner with faculty to provide structured, pre-departure information literacy instruction to students noted that students were better prepared for their required research projects (Sasser, 2018⁶). For instances in which the partnership between academic library professionals and instructional faculty have progressed far enough, academic library professionals with either travel experience or connections at a desired destination should pursue more active roles, in order to develop and co-teach study away courses (White, Ye, and Guccione, 2009⁷; and Griner, Herron, and White, 2015⁸).

A small number of recent case studies have been published on the topic of place-based information literacy instruction in study away courses, or the idea of providing information literacy instruction in the field. Academic library professionals have been embedded in short-term and semester-long study away courses, providing information literacy instruction in both formal and informal modes (Griffin and Sasser, 2019⁹). The Association for College and Research Libraries' Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education has been demonstrated to be particularly useful when teaching information literacy in a study away classroom (Kutner, 2019¹⁰). Alternatively, when travel is not possible, primary sources from digital archives are a useful place-based information literacy tool (Leonard, 2019¹¹). Of course, to truly embed information literacy into study away courses, academic library professionals can pursue the creation of their own courses which include information literacy as intentional student learning outcomes (McElroy and Bridges, 2017¹²), presuming their campus community is open to that opportunity.

While the literature covers the ways in which academic library professionals can reach out to students and instructional faculty to provide information literacy instruction in study away courses, it does not clearly address how often information literacy skills are expected of students in their study away courses, nor whether the necessary information literacy skills are taught by academic library professionals.

METHODS

To address the questions of whether information literacy is a frequent aspect in short-term study away courses, and whether academic library professionals provide services in those courses, two survey instruments were created, one targeted to academic library professionals, and the other to instructional faculty. Both anonymous, web-based survey instruments were created on the SpringShare LibWizard platform, and received Institutional Review Board exemptions from the author's university. Each survey was promoted through the author's university, social media, and various disciplinary electronic distribution lists, though access to instructional faculty distribution lists was restricted. Both instruments were active from mid-February until mid-March of 2020, with 84 responses to the survey of library professions, but only 29 responses to the survey of instructional faculty.

For the purposes of this research, "Short Term Study Away courses" are defined as those for which "students receive academic credit, involve travel away from the student's home institution for up to six weeks, and are taught by instructional faculty employed by the student's home institution. These courses may be facilitated within the home country or abroad." The definition of "information literacy" was provided to all participants as "a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed, and to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information." The term "academic library professionals" was preferred over "librarians" in order to include those whose institutions did not specifically use the title "librarian."

RESULTS

The purpose of this research was twofold: first, to gauge whether information literacy is an expected component in short-term study away courses; and second, to ascertain whether academic library professionals provide that instruction in these courses. To those ends, both surveys followed similar lines of questioning.

Both surveys included a question on at which point in the course information literacy skills were expected from students. For those respondents who affirmed knowledge of information literacy in short-term study away

courses, both groups provided similar answers, as compiled in Figure 1: information literacy skills were expected approximately 40% of the time during pre-departure, 30% of the time while in the field, and approximately 30% of the time post-return.

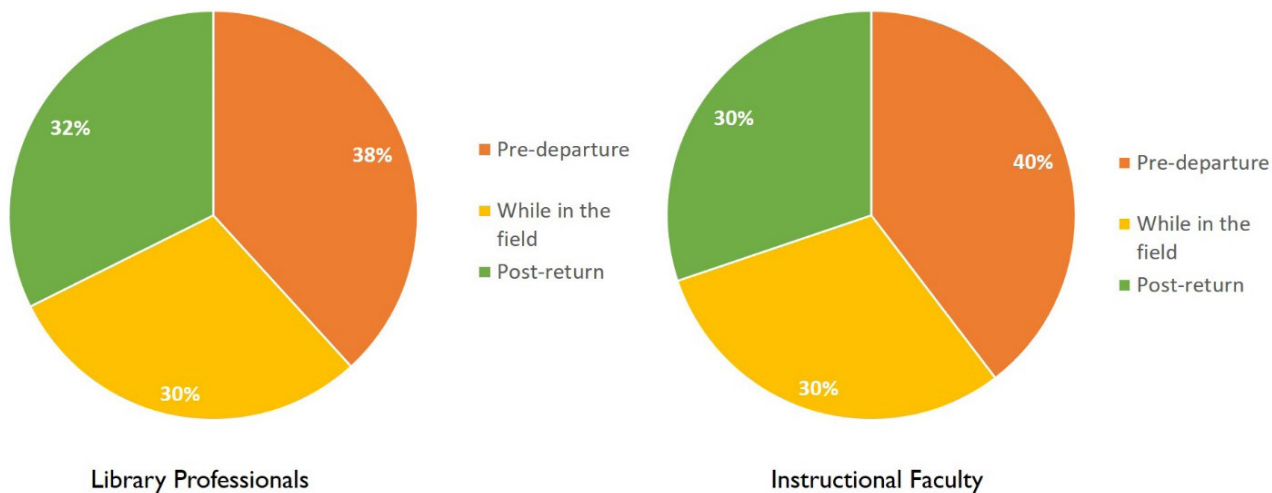


FIGURE 1. Two pie charts, depicting answers from academic library professionals (left) and instructional faculty (right), on when information literacy skills are utilized in short-term study away courses.

This was one of the few instances where the two survey instruments returned nearly identical results.

Both groups were queried on the level of information literacy expected from students in short-term study away courses. As demonstrated in Figure 2, the academic library professionals reported primarily basic and moderate information literacy skills, with no superior skills expected.

For courses in which you have been involved, what level of information literacy was expected from students during the course?

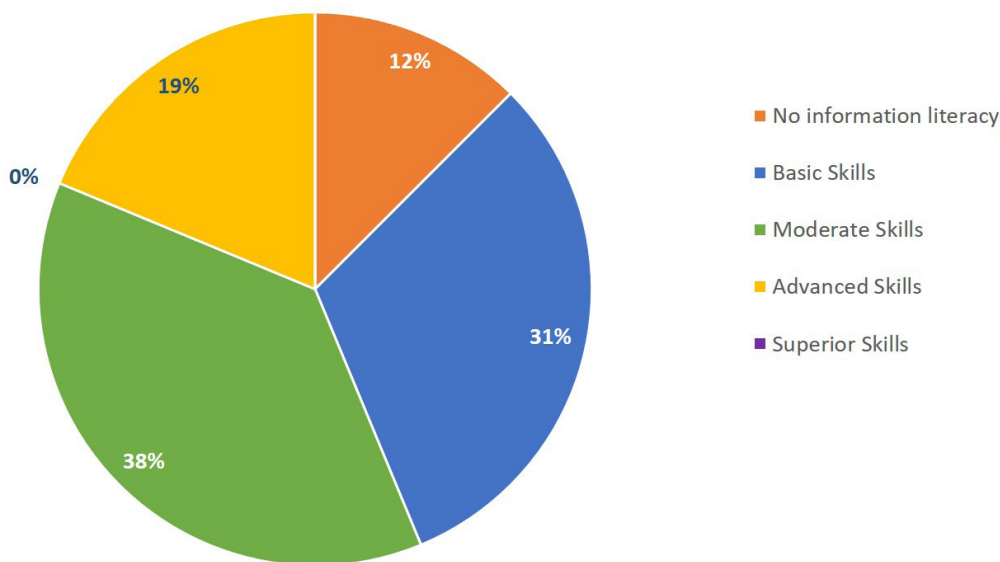


FIGURE 2. Pie chart depicting the responses of academic library professionals to the question “for courses in which you have been involved, what level of information literacy was expected from students during the course?”

For those instructional faculty who affirmed information literacy to be a part of their short-term study away courses, approximately one-third of respondents, their expectations of the student skill level were higher, as demonstrated in Figure 3, and included some expectation of superior information literacy skills.

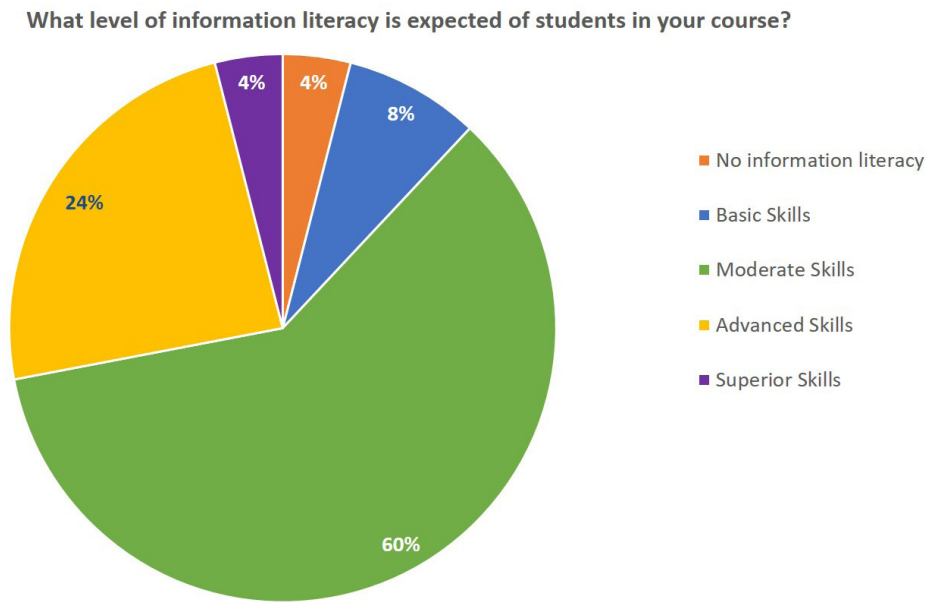


FIGURE 3. Pie chart depicting the responses of instructional faculty to the question “for courses in which you have been involved, what level of information literacy was expected from students during the course?”

To address whether academic library professionals were involved in these short-term study away courses, academic library professionals were queried on whether they have ever participated such a course, with nineteen percent reporting in the affirmative. For those who had participated, they were asked what led to their inclusion. As shown in Figure 4, the answers ranged from their particular knowledge of a subject or location, to the frequency that participation is expected at their institutions, to their own initiative in pursuing a partnership. Respondents were allowed to select more than one answer.

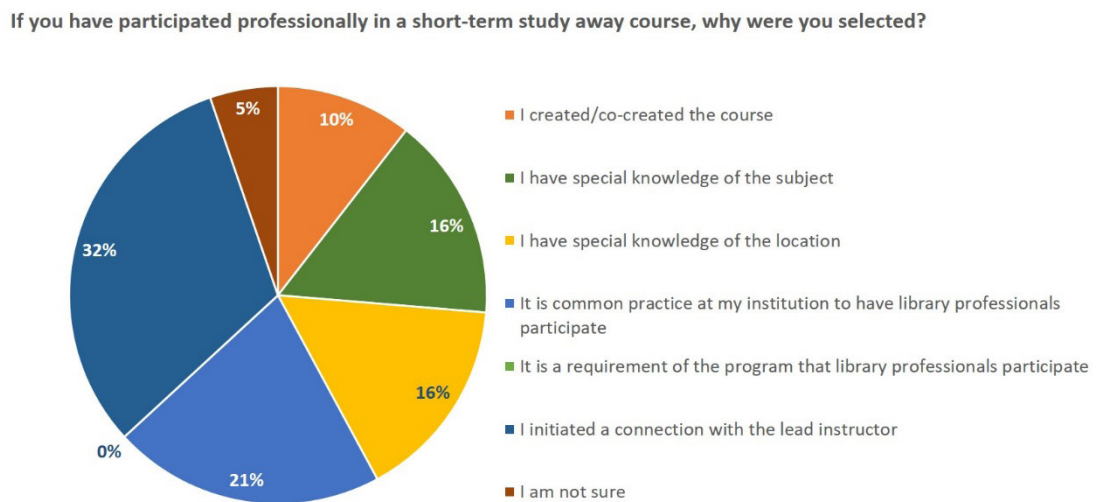


FIGURE 4.: Pie chart listing the responses of academic library professionals as to why they were chosen to participate in a short-term study away course.

For those who had not participated, they were queried on why, as well. As demonstrated in Figure 5, their responses were varied, with the largest responses falling into areas of lack of opportunity and budget or staffing constraints.

If you have not participated professionally in a short-term study away course, why not?

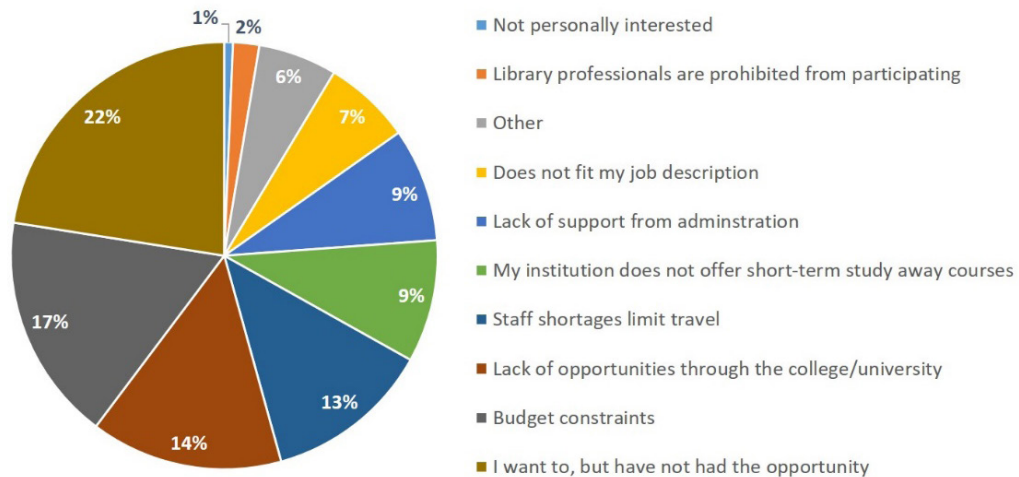


FIGURE 5. Pie chart showing the responses of academic library professionals asked why they had not participated in a short-term study away program.

An overwhelming number of respondents to the instructional faculty survey, eight-seven percent, reported that academic library professionals had no role in their short-term study away courses. When given the opportunity to provide comments on this question, their responses fell into some common categories. As demonstrated in Figure 6, those categories included budgetary constraints and that the knowledge and skills of the instructional faculty were sufficient to teach the necessary information literacy skills.

Trends in faculty comments on why library professionals are not included in study away courses

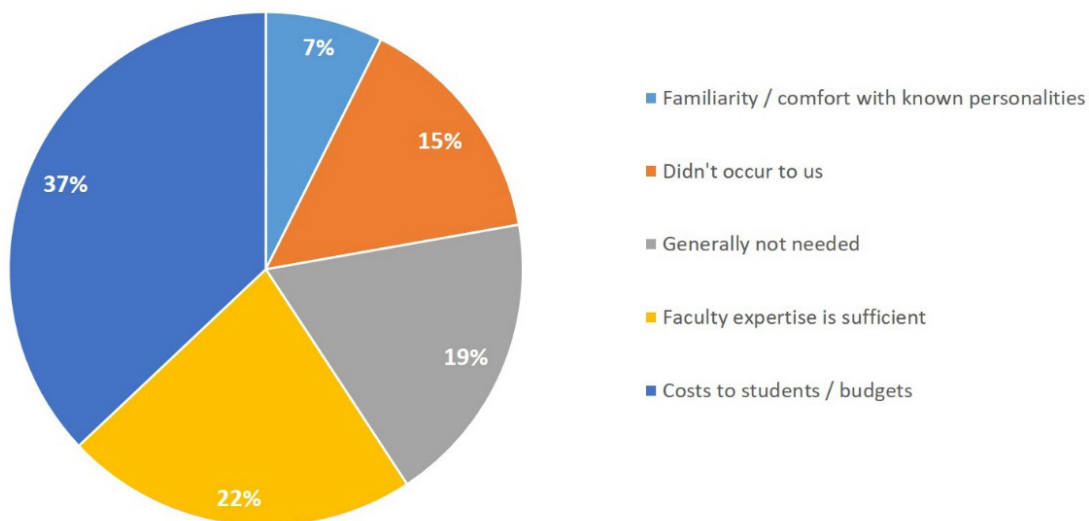


FIGURE 6. Pie chart demonstrating trends in faculty comments on why academic library professionals are not included in their short-term study away courses.

DISCUSSION

While the questions answered in these preliminary surveys provide a glimpse into how information literacy and academic library professionals play a part in short-term study away programs, the respondents' anonymous comments provide context to their responses, and open up new avenues of inquiry.

Information Literacy and Student Learning Outcomes

Without direct involvement in a course, it is difficult for academic library professionals to gauge if information literacy is a required student learning outcome in short-term study away courses, or even a preferred skill. It is equally difficult to be certain if student research questions, or even instruction requests, are related to short-term study away courses. As one astute library professional noted, "...we could be providing instruction for short-term study classes and not realize it. A professor will contact us and we offer instruction via the web-conferencing tools in the LMS and recorded sessions. Also, we could be providing one-on-one instruction via email, chat, ... Zoom, etc. and not realize that the contact is in one of the short-term study away classes."

A few instructional faculty also expressed a wish to see descriptions of the variety of information forms literacy instruction can take, as they were unclear on what it might look like in study away courses. Academic library professionals working to form relationships with instructional faculty might consider preparing creative examples of place-based information literacy instruction, particularly for courses that do not require traditional, library-based research, to aid in instructional faculty understanding.

Course Design, Academic Freedom, and Gatekeeping

The design of short-term study away courses, like all courses, must follow institutional requirements, but are primarily guided by instructional faculty interest and expertise. As such, more than one comment indicated that library professional were involved during course design, but not after the courses launched: "we pioneered having librarians in the class to help identify primary source data associated with the areas the course visits. In recent years, we have not had these professionals as part of the course. We still use materials from when the librarians were part of the course." Many responses from instructional faculty further indicated strong feelings that their expertise is sufficient without involving academic library professionals: "A library professional would be superfluous given the fact the instructors are both published scholars in the fields of Spanish history and culture with considerable experience locating, evaluating, and organizing information from multiple disciplines in Spanish and Catalan/Valenciano in Spain."

A few commenters discussed the types of travel companions they prefer for their courses, indicating that prior personal familiarity, as well as prior study abroad leadership, are key: "I choose travel chaperones based on having experience with the individual. Most of the time, I select people who have led their own programs or who have participated with me before." This preference for a familiar co-leader, while understandable, could be perceived as gatekeeping, further ensuring that academic library professionals without the ability to create their own courses may have difficulty finding opportunities to work closely with courses. On the other hand, the literature is supported here in the clear need for academic library professionals to initiate liaison relationships with instructional faculty in order to build that necessary familiarity.

Budgets and Institutional Priorities

By far, the most frequent comment from instructional faculty referred to the need to keep student costs low. Each additional faculty travelling with a course adds to students' costs, and with the need to make study away opportunities as affordable to students as possible, most institutions appear to limit the travelling instructors to two persons. For this reason, as stated many of the respondents, they prefer to choose a travel companion with existing disciplinary knowledge. For institutions which prioritize information literacy in short-term study away courses, academic library professionals would need to make the case that their disciplinary knowledge would be vital while in the field.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research faced some significant limitations. First and foremost, the abbreviated reach of the survey of instructional faculty meant that the sample size was quite small, and self-selected. Access to an international study abroad distribution list was denied based upon the author's lack of membership. As a result, the survey relied more heavily on social media and word-of-mouth than anticipated. With only 29 respondents, the results can be counted as anecdotal, at best, and certainly not conclusive. Further, all of the responses on the two survey instruments were self-reported, and based upon personal observation or perception.

This research was also initiated in February of 2020, just as the COVID-19 pandemic was beginning to spread across the United States. Participation could have been affected by the rapidly changing instructional environment at institutions of higher education, as well as the sudden uncertainty of future academic travel.

Given the limitations above, and as indicated by the responses to these preliminary surveys, further quantitative research is needed.

CONCLUSION

In order to determine if there is a place for information literacy in short-term study away programs, and what place academic library professionals have in that instruction, these preliminary studies queried academic library professionals and instructional faculty on their perceptions of short-term study away courses. Based upon the responses and comments on these surveys, and building upon the existing literature, it is clearly important for academic library professionals to move beyond their traditional, passive practice of waiting for instruction requests. Whether the goal is to provide information literacy instruction pre-departure or in the field, academic library professionals must take the initiative to forge partnerships with institutional global studies programs and instructional faculty in order to build the necessary relationships. Future research is necessary to determine if institutions of higher education require information literacy in these short-term study away courses, and how that instruction is structured.

NOTES

1. Alica, C. White, Yunshan Ye, and Margaret Guccione, "Study Abroad Students: Designing Library Services to Meet Their Needs," *Journal of Library Administration* 49 (2009): 187-196, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930820802312979>.
2. Laurie Kutner, "Think Locally, Act Globally: Understanding Home Institution Library Engagement Among Study-Abroad Students," *College & Research Libraries* 70, no. 2 (March 2009): 158-176.
3. Kayo Denda, "Study Abroad Programs: A Golden Opportunity for Academic Library Engagement," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 39, no. 2 (March 2013): 155-160.
4. Sarah Faye Cohen, and Andy Burkhardt, "Even an Ocean Away: Developing Skype-Based Reference for Students Studying Abroad," *Reference Services Review* 38, no.2 (2010): 264-273, <https://doi.org/10.1108/00907321011045025>
5. White, Ye, and Guccione, "Study Abroad Students."
6. Patricia Puckett Sasser, "Envisioning Research: Information Literacy for Study Away," In *Information Literacy in Music: An Instructor's Companion*, edited by Beth Christiansen, Erin Conor, and Marian Ritter (A-R Editions, 2018): 219-222.
7. White, Ye, and Guccione, "Study Abroad Students."
8. Lily Griner, Patricia Jean Herron, and Susan White, "Study Abroad Partnerships: Librarians, Business Faculty, and In-Country Facilitator Develop an Innovative Experiential Learning Program," *Journal of business & finance librarianship* 20 (2015): 189-208, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08963568.2015.1046782>.
9. Melanie Griffin and Patricia Puckett Sasser, "Wish You Were Here: Embedded Librarianship in an Education Abroad Context," *Recasting the Narrative: Association of College and Research Libraries annual conference proceedings* (2019): 848-855.
10. Laurie Kutner, "Undergraduate Education Abroad in Community Settings: Pedagogical Opportunities for Librarians," in *The Globalized Library: American Academic Libraries and International Students, Collections, and Practices*, eds. Yelena Luckert & Lindsay Inge Carpenter (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2019), 299-314.
11. Anne E Leonard, "Information Literacy in Place-Based Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning," in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Virtual Place-Based Learning*, eds. Reneta D. Lansiquot & Sean Patrice MacDonald (Switzerland: Cham, 2019), 53-67.
12. Kelly McElroy and Laurie M. Bridges, "Librarians leading short-term study abroad," *Strategic Library*, no. 43 (October 15, 2017): 1-6, https://www.librarystop.net/SL/SL_Oct17_1.pdf