

Making College “Worth It” – Season 1, Episode 10

Crossing Borders at Home

Nolan Schultheis (00:12):

Welcome to Making College Worth It, the show that examines engaged learning activities that increase the value of college experiences.

Jessie Moore (00:18):

In each episode, we share research from Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning and our international network of scholars. We explore engaged learning activities that recent college graduates associate with our financial and time commitment to college being worthwhile.

Nolan Schultheis (00:33):

I'm Nolan Schultheis, a first year student at Elon University, studying psychology with an interest in law. I'm the Center for Engaged Learning's Podcast producer and a legal profession scholar.

Jessie Moore (00:43):

And I'm Jessie Moore, director of Elon's Center for Engaged Learning and a Professor of Professional Writing and Rhetoric.

Nolan Schultheis (00:50):

In this episode, we'll focus on Study Away, which could include global learning abroad, but it can also include global learning closer to campus. We'll talk to Amanda Sturgill, associate Professor of Communications at Elon University. She's the author of Detecting Deception, Tools to Fight Fake News, and a co-editor of Mind the Gap: Global Learning at Home and Abroad.

Jessie Moore (01:10):

In a 2021 national poll conducted by the Elon University poll and the Center for Engaged Learning, only 20% of recent college graduates in the United States had taken part in study abroad during college in other national polls, that percentage is even lower. Given the number of perceived and real barriers to studying abroad, colleges need to consider other ways to support students' global learning. We're excited to hear from our guests about one strategy for fostering global learning closer to campus.

Amanda Sturgill (01:49):

Hi, my name's Amanda Sturgill and I am an associate professor of journalism at Elon, and I also teach in our media analytics and graduate programs. I've always been interested in global learning. Even before I came to Elon, I was able to teach abroad for a summer, and I've also been interested in community-based learning is what we would call it Elon. A lot of places would call it service learning, but basically the sort of integrated into the community kind of opportunities for students that also produce some social good. And so there's a lot of overlaps between all of the high impact practices in learning, but I feel like in particular between global learning and study away and the community based learning, there's a lot of really interesting overlaps. I felt like when I first came to Elon and started doing study abroad kind of things with our graduate program that it was a great and rich program, but it also had opportunities to be better by being a more intentional program by exploiting some of the things that students could learn specifically from being away from campus. So that was the thing that made me first interested in it.

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Jessie Moore (02:52):

Thank you. And can you tell us a little bit about your edited collection, Mind the Gap: Global learning at home and abroad?

Amanda Sturgill (02:59):

Yeah, absolutely. So Mind the Gap came about as a product of a multi-year research seminar that we did through the Center for Engaged Learning. And so we had scholars from around the US and Canada, many different types of institutions, everything from community colleges to research one institutions, and we also had people in a bunch of different types of positions at universities. So we had some faculty, we had some staff who worked in study abroad offices. We had some staff who worked in other kinds of offices. And being able to have those different perspectives really made it for a very rich research seminar. The research seminar split into multiple groups who investigated different aspects of mostly study abroad. In our case, most of the people who came into our seminar were interested in that. One of my seminar co-leaders, Neil Banya, was interested in study away or domestic off-campus studies he would call it. And I was interested in that too. So that ended up being the chapter that I contributed to the collection.

Jessie Moore (03:59):

You anticipated my next question because you do also have a chapter in the collection. Your chapter is called Crossing Borders at Home, the Promise of Global Learning Close to Campus. What prompted you in the context of the collection and the research seminar to really want to push that thinking about what global learning can look like in communities closer to campus?

Amanda Sturgill (04:22):

I feel like the early research and study abroad focused on crossing geopolitical borders and if that was somehow a magical part of the educational experience and reading, especially Neil's work in preparation for the seminar, it became obvious that the kinds of learning, the kinds of lessons that we're teaching are found in many different kinds of experiences students have ranging from things that happen right on their own campus to things even that happen before they come to us. And the university too, those big high impact plane ticket and passport kind of events. So that was sort of a theme that we had in the seminar was having a more expansive view of global learning. But I did feel like the domestic Off-campus study deserved its own attention in that instead of just being sort of a part of other people's chapters.

Jessie Moore (05:11):

And you've had a couple of examples in your own work of doing this type of global learning study way that is close to campus. Could you share a couple of those examples with us?

Amanda Sturgill (05:22):

Yeah, absolutely. So I'm a professor in a professional school, which means that in addition to learning the theoretical underpinnings of the journalism and media industries, we also learn how to do and how to actually create those journalistic products. In order to do that, we need to have subjects to write about. So it's a really a natural fit and there's often need out in the community for good communication artifacts, good communication products like websites and brochures and videos and all of those other kinds of things. Many potential community partners would benefit from those but are not able to have

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the funding to do it with professionals, so they work with us. That being said, a couple of things I can talk about. One was a project that we did out of the School of communications that actually involved five different classes working with one community partner.

(06:12):

So we had a food bank here in the county where Elon is located that was quite enormous in its operation. They had about 5,000 clients per month who received food from them over a multi-county area. And they mostly just needed content that they could share as a way of doing development, as a way of letting people who supported them know the kinds of work they're doing, those kinds of things. So we had two writing classes, two video classes and a web development class all working together for that one community partner to create content for them. And we actually did investigation of the learning from that. And we found both sort of attitudinal good feeling kinds of changes, which is most of the research in off-campus learning is did students feel good about what they did? And they did, and the community partner was happy in all of those kinds of things.

(07:06):

We actually did some pre and post testing of student knowledge and we found that there was a difference in their knowledge as well as their attitudes about people in poverty and about the role of the media in representing economic diversity. So that was one I do teach in our graduate program in interactive media, and we have a centerpiece project that is part of that program. So the students all take cohorted classes in the fall, in the spring, they take electives, but we have a January term here and in the January term, the students in groups of 10 or fewer get on an airplane usually and go to another country and they make a usually website for some kind of non-governmental nonprofit organization. It's a tremendously rich educational experience. Well, one year we had Covid and because of Covid we were not able to get on airplanes and go to places.

(07:54):

And we tried our best to figure out a way to do that, even if it was going to be just going to another US state or going to someplace else in the us. And just because of the health concerns and the duty of care that we have to the people that we work with, that even if we weren't concerned for ourselves, we would still have to be concerned for the people that we're working with. I ended up doing a fly in to Greensboro, which is about 30 minutes down the road here from campus. And I have to tell you, that was one of my most educationally rich that I've done, even though it was not very far from where we were. My students created a website for a museum that commemorates a company town in Greensboro. And so this company town was almost entirely African-American workers, many of whom had originally come there when they were freed from slavery, they came to Greensboro because there were jobs in this factory.

(08:53):

The factory made terracotta pipes. So at one time most of the sewer pipes in the south were made at this one factory in Greensboro. And because of the laws that came up from reconstruction and later, the town was very insular. They had their own schools, people had their own shopping there, all of those kind of things. And it's something that gentrification is kind of pushed out. It's now an area in Greensboro that has a lot of car dealerships and those kinds of things in it. There are still though a couple of streets there and some of the people who lived there had actually worked with University of North Carolina at Greensboro, one of their faculty who's now a museum curator at the Smithsonian to create a house museum out of one of the houses so that people would know what that community was

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like. But in order to go to that house museum, you have to go to Greensboro and it's not even easy to find within Greensboro.

(09:44):

So what my students did is they created a virtual version of that museum that's visitable online, and in order to do that, they had to go and get entree into a community that they didn't know they had to go and do interviews with people who were very suspicious of them. We had to go door to door knocking on doors, asking people for things and do you have any pictures we could borrow and we're going to scan them and bring them back and those kind of things. And just having to navigate those kinds of differences. So generational differences, economic differences, those kind of things are exactly the same kind of things that we would see in the fly-in trips if we go to another country. The other thing that was really neat about doing that project though was that often with the fly-ins, I think it's a rich educational experience because it's disorienting for the students.

(10:33):

And so if you think about how people learn, usually it's like you have some kind of disorienting incident and then you kind of incorporate new information and then you build a stronger mental model based on that. Right? When we go abroad, so we go to an indigenous group on a mountain in Costa Rica or something, all of my students are experiencing that disorientation in the same way. Our graduate program in interactive media tends to be about 50% HBCU graduates and about 50% other from other places all over the country who come in. And when we did this particular project, our HBCU graduates ended up being the cultural interpreters for the other students because they were talking to people who were like their grandparents, other people that they had grown up with. And it really changed some of the intergroup dynamics in ways that were really great to go through and reflect on and process with the students to do that. So I feel like it actually added more to the experience than going to another country would have.

Jessie Moore (11:35):

That's so cool. Both the project itself, but also the learning opportunity for students and the many dynamics that were at play there. And I also love that some of the students who brought agency with that community were able to be a different form of leader within the project group. So that's really cool in terms of honoring the prior knowledge that they bring to or the prior experiences that they bring.

Amanda Sturgill (12:06):

And that's something that one of the chapters in the book talks about is the fact that the students don't come into global learning opportunities we give them as blank slates. They come in with previous travel experiences. Some of them come from families with a lot of national diversity in them. Some of them come in having always in their life, been navigating code switching, for example. And oftentimes the experiences that we plan for them don't really take that into account the strengths that the students are already bringing in when they come.

Jessie Moore (12:37):

And I'll note just very quickly that the book that we're talking about Mind the Gap also came out during the pandemic at the very start of it. And so just in case you've missed it, we will link to it on the show notes for this episode and we'll include a discount code so that she can get a discount on a copy. It's a great read, lots of really fun chapters and I find myself citing it over and over again and pointing others

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towards it to think about how we're designing these learning experiences for students and the things that we need to keep in mind about what they bring and what they take away from those experiences.

Amanda Sturgill (13:14):

One other thing I would point out in the process of working with the seminar, one of the things I did was I attended the Forum for Education abroad one time and one of the things that surprised me and I really wasn't aware of is that there is a pretty big divide between how the staff who enable global learning programs and the faculty who teach global learning programs understand each other and understand the kinds of programs that they're putting together. So the fact that we had faculty and staff involved with the groups really adds something to the book I think.

Jessie Moore (13:46):

Absolutely. Thank you for that addition.

Nolan Schultheis (13:48):

When I think of Study Away, I really kind of think of a cultural learning experience, and I know you had said when you took your students to this town, they kind of had a different look on what poverty is. And I think the study away really helps kind of break down ethnocentric barriers. I think that honestly might be one of the biggest things you can gather from it because as much as we have different levels of culture here at Elon and we're able to mix with different groups, different people from different backgrounds, we really only live in our own bubble. I feel like most of the time I am aware of other cultures, but my own is obviously different than if I were to go travel somewhere else. And I think actually being placed into the culture instead of learning about it helps you really understand and experience it and it makes you able to relay that information to other people. And I think that's a great way to help break down maybe stereotypes, misconceptions about people and their culture. And I think it's very important that we just kind of learn about these other places because if we focus exclusively on ourselves and that's not very future oriented for anybody.

Amanda Sturgill (15:07):

Yeah, I think that's very wise. I also think that if you actually get a chance to do the encounters with other people, you develop not just knowledge but skill. So once you do it, you learn how to do it and it makes you more courageous for your next opportunity.

Nolan Schultheis (15:24):

Oh, for sure. I mean that social aspect of being thrown into a place you have no clue about, you don't know anybody, the people there don't know you, they look at you as an outsider. That does take a lot of courage to go up to those people and start trying to facilitate a conversation with them. And I think people that are willing to do that are some very good people and very honorable people because that, I mean, like you said, it takes courage. It takes a lot of effort and not everyone has that willingness and that ability to kind of try and break that social barrier. Most people are comfortable within their own little world,

Jessie Moore (16:01):

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And I think that something that is important to highlight their Nolan too is that you are highlighting the ways that there has to be intentional engagement with the people that we meet and the spaces that we visit, the communities that we visit. It's different than if we're just going someplace to see the sites, but actually saying, no, I want to learn about the community. I want to engage and interact with the people here. And Amanda, your example earlier of the food bank, I love that example because it is not a plane right away. It is just a few miles away from our campus. I took my own students on a semester long project in a school not far from where that food bank was, and it had similar outcomes where it really shifted their understanding of the challenges that families were facing. And it changed some of their perceptions of that some of the challenges weren't a matter of choice, but that there were real struggles there and digging into some of the sociocultural factors that contribute to those struggles as well. So highlighting that both Nolan and I appreciate that in what you're picking up on is that there does have to be intentional engagement and that requires risk, but as Amanda has noted, it gets easier over time the more that you do it. And so I think that that is also one of the rationales for why it's so important to build these experiences into our college curricula and make sure that students have those opportunities.

Amanda Sturgill (17:40):

I think you used an interesting word there, Jessie, which was building it into the curricula because I also think that, and this is something we found in research in the book, that if students have these experiences but they don't have intentional guided reflection on it, it can sometimes be more damaging. It tends to just take whatever sort of incorrect or incomplete ideas they have and solidify them.

Jessie Moore (18:03):

That's a really important thing to highlight. And something I have been thinking about a lot here at the center, we've been working on a facilitating integration and reflection in the Elon experiences. And our Elon experiences include study away and global learning. So I'll link to those in the show notes as well. But we're trying to be really intentional about these aren't just things that you do, these are things that are integrated into the college experience and giving students opportunities to really reflect on them and think about how they're making meaning from those experiences relative to the rest of their college experience too.

Amanda Sturgill (18:43):

And they can be very small experiences. We have a freshman seminar class called the Global Citizen that I teach from time to time. I usually have the students try to do things where they touch different aspects of campus and then they have the option to do that with the community. One of the most powerful things for some of my students is just taking the campus bus route that goes out into Elon because I have students who have never been on public transportation and have never been further than they could walk from campus. Or if they drive, they just drive straight to target and straight back kind of thing. And so just riding the bus around for an hour with a list of questions and things to look for that we can talk about when we come back. It's a very small thing. You don't have to change your whole curriculum to do that, but it can actually be pretty powerful learning wise.

Jessie Moore (19:30):

I love that example.

Nolan Schultheis (19:32):

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What would you like college students and the people who support them to know about making study way a meaningful learning experience?

Amanda Sturgill (19:39):

I think it's important to go into your experiences with people who are different from you with as open of a mind as you can. I think that in particular, assuming people's motivations can be dangerous. So when you see someone who's doing something that you don't understand, you can observe longer, you can maybe ask, why are you doing this? Why are you doing this way in a sort of value neutral way? And I think you can learn a lot from that.

Jessie Moore (20:09):

So the parallel question, what would you like colleges and their faculty and staff to think about when they plan global learning experiences that are closer to campus

Amanda Sturgill (20:19):

That just because it's closer to campus doesn't mean that it can be done without intention. Just because something's easy doesn't mean it's not worthwhile. And this is kind of my own personal thing I guess, but that the people with whom you work are doing you a favor by teaching your students so they don't work for you. It's really easy to have an idea in your head that we're the experts going into the community or that our 18 to 22 year olds are the experts in things we're sending them out in the community to do. And that can tend to lead to some bad results for the community and for the students as well. So when we use the language of partnership, we really should mean that

Jessie Moore (21:08):

That's such an important reminder and I think it's something that we lose sight of from time to time, but it really, we are imposing on our partners when we plan these events and hopefully there's mutual benefits from the learning opportunities when they are well planned, but that doesn't always happen. So I appreciate that reminder.

Nolan Schultheis (21:34):

I think, honestly, that's a great point. A facilitator needs to remove any expectations they have because I think expectations kind of bottleneck the way we would interact with the student and maybe the way that you would introduce the students to the area with expectations is different than if you were to just tell them, Hey, I'm going to take you guys out here. I want you to explore. I want you to tell me what you see rather than we're going here, you're going to do X, Y, and Z, and then that's it. I think that's a very limited learning experience and I think that also reflects on the students. As a student, I'm always looking for what does the teacher want? And if there are no expectations, I feel like I would be much more willing to kind of tap into my creative nature and really ask what I want to ask. And I think when there's an element of control from the student's perspective, it would definitely motivate them to want to learn more.

Amanda Sturgill (22:37):

Photo elicitation is one of my favorite things for those kind of experiences. So when I take my students off campus, I take pictures of them doing things, and then we go back to class and I make a slideshow

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out of the pictures and we discuss them and who's in the picture and what are you doing and what does it mean to you and what does it mean to the other people in the picture and those kinds of things. I think that can be a very powerful way of reframing things,

Jessie Moore (23:03):

And I love that that's honoring what the students are bringing to the experience, but also reminding them of who else they were interacting with and what else was happening in that space.

Nolan Schultheis (23:13):

Is there anything else you'd like our listeners to know about global learning close to campus?

Amanda Sturgill (23:18):

I would say if it's not intentional, it's probably not worth doing, particularly if it is involving other people in the community. You can put a lot of burdens on the community for not really good reasons if you don't have an idea of what you want people to get out of it.

Jessie Moore (23:37):

Thank you. That's such an important reminder and nice tagline too, so I appreciate that. Thank you so much for making time to visit with us about global learning, about the book *Buying the Gap*, and about your experiences with Off-Campus domestic study in our own Backyard.

Amanda Sturgill (23:57):

Well, thank you so much. It's one of my favorite topics, so I'm always happy to discuss it.

Nolan Schultheis (24:01):

Thank you.

Jessie Moore (24:10):

So Nolan, what were some of the things that stood out to you that you think students should think about in relation to this type of study? A way that's closer to campus,

Nolan Schultheis (24:20):

Really just the fact that things can be different, not even 45 minutes away from us. I don't think people consider that a lot. There's different living dynamics literally down the road, and I think being able to learn about that will make a person more open to just people and interacting with the world in general. I think a lot of people kind of want to stick to themselves and don't really want to co-mingle with other people and don't trust them, but I think that we really need to rebuild a sense of community, especially after Covid. I think that kind of really established a lot of social barriers for a lot of people and made it easier to kind of seclude themselves. And I think that with traveling closely, even traveling abroad, it really enables us to get an idea and taste of different cultures and just teach us a little that people out there are living differently and either we're fortunate or there are people unlucky that have to deal with certain things. And it's important to be reminded that those things are out there and not to continually live in comfort and to try and push for making things better for those people.

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Jessie Moore (25:37):

I also really appreciate your highlighting that this is a way for us to relearn how to build community with people who may be very close to us in terms of geographic proximity or people who might be a world away, but your note about the pandemic shifting the way we interact with people, it's almost taken us a while to relearn how to meet people and how to genuinely engage. And as we are thinking about that, I also appreciate Dr. Sturgill's note that any of these study away initiatives need to be conducted with intention, that we really need to think about our community partners, whether they're locally, near campus or international partners as partners, and really attend to how we're making sure that the experience is mutually beneficial, acknowledging the strengths and experiences that our community partners bring, just what we and our students bring, but that there's a partnership that has to be fostered there with intention. And then the other piece of it is bringing that learning experience back to the rest of your college education, so it's not just go and have this experience and then it's done, but go have this experience and then reflect on what are you learning from it? How does it fit in with the rest of your college education and the other things that you're experiencing as part of that education. That intentionality, both in the partnership and in framing the learning experience is not just a one-off, but as something that's more long-term and ongoing.

Nolan Schultheis (27:29):

Following up on that, I would say that the consideration in the actual going in with intent, I think would also need a follow in the reflection. I think reflection of what you did, what you said, who you interacted with also needs to be very meticulously looked at. I think if we just went out there and talked to these people and we were like, oh, okay, that's cool. I learned that, but I don't really care. How does that affect me? That doesn't change anything. I know, and I think that's the exact reason we need to send people out there is to get rid of that idea because once you get rid of that barrier, that's really whenever the community starts to get established and the reflection starts to actually mean something to you.

Jessie Moore (28:20):

Great point. Thank you. Once again, I'm Jessie Moore.

Nolan Schultheis (28:37):

And I'm Nolan Schultheis. Thank you for joining us for Making College Worth It from Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning.

Jessie Moore (28:44):

To learn more about Study Away, including Study Away that's close to campus, see our show notes and other resources at www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org. Subscribe to the show wherever you listen to podcasts for more strategies on making college worth it.