

Academic Expectations



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The last few years has seen a continuous rise in the number of college students wanting to study and serve abroad. Some are eager to engage difficult problems and places, and are willing to prepare themselves—intellectually, physically, and spiritually—to do so. Others are simply looking to kill time globally. Despite a record of programs and participants numbers, program directors consistently complain of how “having fun” and “building a resume” are much higher priorities for most students than real efforts to learn a second language, develop meaningful relationships, gain new perspectives, and make even a modest contribution to social change. The host culture easily becomes, much like a Starbucks latte or Netflix movie, merely a commodity—something to be anticipated, purchased, and consumed.

Chief among professional concerns is the degree to which students carry their homegrown Internet addiction abroad. A 2011 survey reveals that 70 percent of U.S. study abroad students in France spend upwards of four hours every day on Facebook, Skype, and email. Though physically in another country, most allow themselves to remain psychologically at home. Other surveys show that when not online or in perfunctorily attended classes, students either spend time partying in town or discovering places elsewhere, away from their program site. (Some programs even offer morning or afternoon class options for those too hung-over from the night before.) As you might imagine, few of the academic assignments, originally designed to “frame” student entrée in and understanding of cultural realities, ever get done. Program directors who would otherwise “hold the line” academically, fear that doing so would result in severely reduced enrollments. So they simply surrender to their customer base and reduce academic expectations to almost nothing.

Predictably, little deep learning actually occurs. Students return to their home campuses talking about how “awesome,” even “life changing,” it all was. But two or three months following homecoming, few can point to any real “life change”—in moral commitments, everyday habits, core relationships—as a result of the time and miles covered. Most simply fall back in step with the normative behaviors of the crew that saw them off.

Come graduation day, chances are that the Commencement speaker will stand behind the podium with a familiar charge: “Follow *your* passion, chart *your* own course, and march to the beat of *your* own drummer.” The expressive individualism that sent them to other lands now sends them out into the work-a-day world. Only much later in life will they discover that life tasks and

commitments, not self-fulfillment, lie at the center of a life well lived. As a wise man once declared many years ago, the purpose in life is not to find yourself; it's to lose yourself.

What does this have to do with the Global Learning Term? The GLT, in its own way, seeks to set study abroad on a different plain: not so much to *discover* one's self as to *dissolve* one's self into a set of study and service tasks oriented to the common good. One of the most truly transformative things to come out of the U.S.—the 12-steps of Alcoholics Anonymous—is based not on 'discovering' or even 'helping' ourselves, but on admitting our failures and addictions (to people, praise, possessions, and power). On the GLT, we will likely be brought to the end of ourselves as Step One to opening ourselves, through strangers, to the unyielding divine love of God. Not that the GLT is opposed to adventure and excitement. But when "having the time of my life" trumps "being changed" and "being of service" as the overriding objective of educational travel, the door is opened to deep disappointments. At the top of the list of disappointments are disappointing course grades, as well as lost opportunities to be different and to do good.

The following thoughts, divided into three sections, are offered to help minimize your regrets and maximize your satisfactions.

I. Course Expectations

There are five courses available on the GLT. Three are *required* (GLBL325 Family Organization, GLBL335 Global Internship, and GLBL350 Global Study Project) and two are *elective* (GLBL101 Self-directed Language Learning I and GLBL340 Community Life). All but GLBL101 requires the reading of at least 400 pages of subject-relevant material. Every course also requires writing, whether an ethnography (Family Organization), an analytic journal (International Internship, Self-directed Language Learning), or a research report (Global Study Project, Community Life, International Internship [6]). On average, each of these written products runs between 30 and 50 double-spaced pages, and is submitted individually, as a spiral-bound portfolio.

Workload expectations

The portfolios prepared for each contracted GLT course may seem long, but remember: they represent the work of an *entire semester*. What does a semester's worth of work entail? The U.S. Department of Education standard reads as follows: "One hour of classroom or direct faculty instruction and a minimum of two hours of out of class student work each week for approximately fifteen weeks for one semester or trimester hour of credit." In other words, every 3-unit undergraduate course represents at least 120 hours of "classroom" and "out of class" work. On a conventional campus, you would typically attend class for 3 hours a week for 15 weeks (for approximately 45 hours of in-class time), and then have out-of-class work estimated at two hours for every hour in class per week (or 80 hours total). You would read texts, compose response papers, take quizzes, sit for a mid-term and/or final and, as a culminating assignment, research and write a 20-page term paper.

While GLT students typically don't utilize a conventional "classroom" as part of their program of study, they *are* expected to invest a minimum of 120 hours working on every 3-unit GLT course. Course-related tasks typically include traditional exercises like reading and writing. But they also involve unconventional learning activities—like participating in community events, informally interviewing family members, and collaborating in some form of community outreach—that enable the community to serve as the classroom and its residents as educators. Though non-traditional,

these activities nevertheless are (a) intentional, (b) structured, (c) related to course subject matter, and (d) incorporated into a course product.

All to say, the 30-50 page GLT report should *not* be compared, in any way, to a library-based “term paper” produced for an on-campus course. Rather, each report becomes *the* primary means for demonstrating what you have learned on the GLT, and what grade best represents the breadth and depth of that learning. As you plan, gather information, and begin to read and write, try to imagine *someone else* scoring your work and deciding, based of what you have written, what *course grade* (not term paper grade) you deserve. Does that exercise make you feel a tad bit anxious? It should. A facilitative (vs. debilitating) anxiety can push you towards your best work.

Grading expectations

Students sometimes question whether writing done on an off-campus, experience-based program can or should be graded. After all, how can even a 30 or 40 page report ever hope to capture *all* that someone has experienced and learned over months in a distant land? Even if is a fairly decent representation of that experience it is, nevertheless, the *writer’s* version of what happened. How can there be “right” or “wrong” reporting?

While it is certainly true that certain kinds of essays and journals have no “right” or “wrong” content, it is equally true that they can be, and constantly are, evaluated. Like many written exams, journals and reports vary greatly in *completeness*, *descriptiveness*, *analytic depth*, and *writing quality*. Some reveal acute powers of observation and analysis, while others scarcely scratch the surface. Some relate field experience to a range of theory and “book knowledge,” whereas others engage issues only at a personal level. Some are written crisply and clearly; others are muddled, wordy, or grammatically incorrect.

After submitting each course portfolio, your academic advisor will evaluate it with four key criteria in mind:

1. *Completeness*: Does the portfolio show evidence of having carefully followed project guidelines, and of having thoroughly read the approved academic materials?
2. *Descriptive detail*: Does the report narrative (e.g. of family life, critical incidences, research findings) describe the phenomenon in rich, vivid detail? Is it “thick” enough to explain the behavior and context of behavior to an outsider?
3. *Analytic depth*. Does the report relate key concepts and insights from authoritative materials as a means of *interpreting* the ideas and opinions contained in the “description” section? Does the analysis probe the cultural description for deeper understanding? Does it avoid cultural/national stereotypes?
4. *Writing quality*. Is the report well organized with clear divisions, smooth transitions and interesting photos, making it pleasurable to read? Are paragraphs and sentences constructed well? Is the report relatively free of grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors? Is there correct and consistent use of a standard citation form? Does it avoid cultural/national stereotypes?

II. Returning Without Reports

“I began my GLT doing quite well. I had lots of time on my hands and used it to keep up with my work. But soon my schedule got busy. When I had ‘free’ time I had no desire to sit inside and do academic work. I wanted to spend time with my host family and friends, and to experience new things. I dropped the original deadlines that I set for myself due to my own lack of organization and diligence. Now that I’m home I am faced with all the work that I left undone. Except now I have a full load of courses, a job, and a serious relationship. I barely have any free time at all, and when I do have some, I can’t muster the motivation to do my GLT work. I’m not even sure where to start. The task seems absolutely overwhelming. I feel like I have to take a large block of time to sit down and do all of it, because completing bits and pieces here and there has proven futile. When I finally begin to write, I find it impossible to return to a place I have already passed. At this point I so badly want to be done with GLT work that I’m putting little care or effort into it. It has become a huge burden in my life, and it is my own fault. Sadly, I’ve completely avoided trying to process through my GLT because I feel like I can’t do that until my work is finished. This has proven to be very unhealthy for me.”

This student’s experience has, unfortunately, been repeated many times over. In fact, due to the increased incidence of students returning without reports, global studies faculty conducted a confidential survey to ascertain the reasons why. These are the “top 10” reasons GLT returnees gave:

1. *Cultural awkwardness*. “I felt awkward doing academic work within my family or community setting because nobody else was reading, writing, or using a computer. I didn’t want to stand out and possibly offend.”
2. *Lack of academic ‘space’*. “I really couldn’t ‘get away’ for a day or so each week to focus on writing. Being in rural Malawi, it would have been impractical, cost-restrictive, and socially awkward for me to leave the village and travel to some ‘neutral’ place to work.”
3. *Lack of motivation*. “I struggled with loneliness much of the time, sometimes feeling so paralyzed that I couldn’t even go outside, much less motivate myself to do academic work.”
4. *Personal issues*. “While I was on the field, a number of personal issues came up that knocked me out emotionally. I’m trying to deal with them now, but it takes a tremendous amount of time and energy, both of which I need to complete the GLT project reports.”
5. *Illness*. “I was bed-ridden for an extended period of time due to illness (e.g. intestinal flu, malaria, etc.).”
6. *Procrastination*. “I basically lacked organization. I know you and GLT alum urge us to take a day out each week to write, but I didn’t do it. I thought that collecting information in the country and then writing the report upon my return to the States would be a productive plan. It wasn’t. Once home, I did not want to think about, read about, or write about Nepal, especially from an academic standpoint. Now I’m paying the price for my procrastination.”
7. *Lack of project resources*. “My research topic changed mid-stream, and I had a difficult time finding relevant support materials and networking local people.”

8. *Partying and romantic relationships.* “After I got caught up in the bar and club scene, my schoolwork faded into the background.” “I met this guy... I honestly wondered if God had intentionally placed this person into my life. Everything else, including studies, took a back seat for quite a while.”
9. *Innocent diversions.* “I allowed various diversions (good things) to take priority over my academic tasks. Africa is an event-oriented rather than time-oriented culture. I found myself thinking: ‘I can always study, but I can’t always do this or that. So I choose to do this or that—hanging out with friends, regional travel, a short-term relationship, and visits by my parents.’”
10. *Social media compulsions.* “I got caught up in a daily ritual of doing Facebook and Skype. I was afraid. I was afraid of life going on without me. I was afraid of not being needed. I was afraid of being forgotten... so I isolated in my room and used the Internet to connect with friends and family at home... What I should have done was leave the house, explore the city, and get to know life outside the walls of my room. I know it’s nobody’s fault but my own. Now I’m paying the price.”

III. Guidelines for Academic Success

Any number of factors might enable some learners to stay focused, organized, and self-regulated throughout their GLT, while causing other learners to get stuck or take early “exits” from their intended course. But *all* can be biased towards academic and intercultural success by following some basic suggestions.

1. **Talk to your host family and new friends about your study and writing requirements.** They need to know why you sometimes need “alone time” or have to say “no” to social invitations. Once you introduce yourself as a writer, they will treat you with regard when they see you writing. Help them to become your academic cheerleaders. Some students even ask their host families to hold them accountable to completing the Family Organization guides (“How much progress have you made in your family report?”).
2. **Determine from the start what value your written work will have.** One of the unique temptations within study abroad programs is for students to pit “experiencing the culture” against “writing the journey.” Analytic writing, at its best, is a mode of being, a way of responding to experience. If, from the outset, you regard your reading and writing as *inseparable* from chance encounters and informal chats, you will position yourself to optimize the educational potential of their interplay. Determine in advance that your academic activities and field experience will have an undivided purpose: to gain fresh perspectives on the wider world. Henry Miller once said, “One’s destination is never a place, but a new way of seeing things.” In-country study and writing are critical guides in helping you reach your destination.
3. **Limit internship hours.** Most of the community organizations that accept you as an intern will want to get as much “mileage” from you as possible. Being unfamiliar with the full range of your academic responsibilities, they may expect you to put in a 40-hour workweek. Purpose to explain your time constraints *before* you “sign on the dotted line” as a volunteer: that you are a student enrolled in a credit-bearing academic program; that the program requires lots of reading, research and writing; and that the internship is just one of several academic processes

that you must manage while abroad. Negotiate a work schedule that does not exceed 12-15 hours per week.

4. **Create a task timeline of projects and tasks.** Most students never have had to organize a semester's worth of structured learning before. For 15 years, "schooling" has involved traditional classrooms, scheduled class times, and instructor-controlled tasks. With this structure firmly established in practice, students learned to show up to class, perhaps take some notes, and then turn in assignments on time. On the GLT all of this is absent. Students, not classrooms and instructors, are responsible to establish their own study and research sites and schedule. This is the real "test" of the GLT—learning to self-regulate, self-motivate, and self-organize. One method students use to pass the test is to create a task timeline. The timeline lays out, perhaps on a piece of notebook paper set sideways, the various *projects* (e.g. Language Learning, Family Org, Internship, and GSP), *time frames* (e.g. July 15 through Aug. 30 for Language Learning), and associated *tasks* (e.g. "guides" in Family Org) that they need to complete. The timeline may be repeatedly revised. Nevertheless, it provides a self-imposed system of accountability that helps shape a more autonomous, creative, and self-determined learning style.
5. **Identify places for reflection and writing.** "Success" on the GLT means finding a groove or rhythm within our host community that allows us to find an optimal balance in the physical, emotional, spiritual, social, and intellectual dimensions of our life. Academically, this means that we search out special *places* where we can pull away and complete course tasks within the time frames we establish for ourselves. We need havens where we can get out of the heat and pollution, focus our thoughts, catch up on reading, write our journey, and communicate with our profs. Agatha Christie wrote in her bathtub. Ernest Hemingway worked standing up in his at his desk, and Truman Capote lying in bed. But private space may not be available in the house where you're staying. In such cases, you will need to look outside, in the surrounding community, for places that are conducive to academic labor. Some students produce their best work in loud, crowded cafes where multiple conversations fuse into a white-noise buzz. Others need a quiet, almost solitary environment to concentrate for long stretches of time. Ask host family members, neighbors, or local students to suggest air-conditioned and Wi-Fi enabled coffee shops, hotel lobbies, libraries, NGO offices, or retreat centers. Then try out these places to see which works best for you.
6. **Find zones of re-creation.** We're more than intellectual beings, and the GLT is more than a series of academic tasks. Besides searching our places for reflection and writing, we also need zones of refreshment and re-creation. Many of you are living and serving in places that test your physical, emotional and spiritual limits. What you see and those you serve constantly pull you into deprivation and pain. The enormity of it all can be overwhelming, leaving us despondent and deadened. We need places where we can step away from the pain, find refreshment, celebrate the beauty and wonder of God and the world, and renew our hope. One's "zone" might be an air-conditioned bedroom of a friend's house in a "nice" part of town, or a quiet, riverside café with great food and music. It could be a weekly worship service or an evening at a local gym. In I Kings 19, God deals with the stressed out prophet Elijah who is running away from Jezebel frightened and depressed. Elijah wants to lie down and die. God sees his condition and allows him to receive much-needed rest, food, and water. Only then is he led into his life tasks. The lesson for us is that we need to look after ourselves, making sure we get the rest, exercise, and celebration we need to re-create and serve. How will you care for yourself within your host community?

7. Develop a sustainable rhythm of work, rest, and reflection. We've identified the *spaces* for reflection and writing, stability and refreshment. Now we'll need a regular *rhythm* that optimizes those spaces on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis. This may prove to be harder than it sounds. In many resource-poor and over-crowded cities, everything seems to take two or three times as long. In sub-Saharan Africa, the "slowly-slowly" approach to life seems to pervade all aspects of life—arrival and departure, work and leisure, construction and study. We can try to "overcome" this slowness in the name of American productivity by seeing how much we can get done in a day. But we are likely to end up blocked from our goals and frustrated with our inability to adapt to local ways. Focus more on *how* than on how much. Yes, there is work to do, but the balance between work, rest, and reflection/study will be discovered through composure and not compulsion.

— On a *daily* basis, arrange a place and time to fix a cup of tea or coffee, sit quietly and gratefully before God, do some inspirational reading, and recharge the batteries. Also, perhaps at day's end, harvest course-related insights in a notebook or electronic journal of some kind. One GLT student living in the middle of Kolkata (India), one of the toughest places on earth, wrote one of the most insightful GLT reports ever. Her strategy? Before going to bed, she took 30 minutes to write rough "jotted notes" (hand-written or word-processed) from the day that captured insights for one or more GLT courses she was working on.

— Each *week*, take one full "study" day in the five-star environment of your choosing. Convert jotted notes into more refined word-processed docs. Do intensive, course-related reading. Plan the next week's academic and service tasks.

— Also each *week*, take one day completely "off" with friends (national or foreign) to do what refreshes you. Go to a gym or favorite restaurant. Take in a movie. Stroll through a park. Okay, you might even go to an air-conditioned mall.

— Once each *month*, take two or three days *out of the city*. With local friends or other GLTers in the region, travel to a clean, quiet, and inspiring place (e.g. hill station or beach) to catch up on rest, take nature walks, view starry skies, contemplate ultimate meanings, do some personal writing, and get re-energized for your regular study and service regimen.

Note: Although most GLT students "rough it" in disadvantaged sections of world cities, there are some who arrange homestays and internships where they have to struggle, not against daily deprivations, but against living as one of the few elites in an otherwise poverty-stricken city. If you are one of those residing in an upscale neighborhood, having 24/7 wireless access in your home (and all the temptations that come with that), and spending way too much "down" time in malls and trendy cafes, the "GLT Rhythm" outlined above may need to be adjusted in the opposite direction.

8. Replace procrastination with discipline. Procrastination is the most common obstacle to any artistic process, including culture and language learning. Neglecting to take notes on a significant incident soon after it occurs robs your entries of clarity, detail, immediacy, and vibrancy. Prose becomes homogenized and generalized. Not good. Yes, writing about memorable events days, even weeks, after the fact is better than never. But the end result often reads like a dim and lifeless news report. Stop telling yourself that you don't have enough time,

or that you can afford to postpone to some later date. Adhere to the “24-hour rule”: Type up any relevant field notes within 24 hours of the observational or interviewing event. This will encourage you to recall and report the facts accurately without “cooking” (contriving detail for) them.

9. **Exercise restraint in the time spent managing your “online presence.”** Social and entertainment media tools like Facebook, Twitter, Skype, blogs, LinkedIn, and YouTube make possible long-distance communication and personal enjoyment. They can also have important educational benefits—for one’s self and others. The problem is they tend to *create a buffer* against taking risks and enjoying (or suffering) the consequences of direct, physical involvement in the life of the host community. Spending hours on Skype calls or browsing hundreds of friends’ and acquaintances’ profiles does provide a sense of temporary connection and wellbeing. But that is precisely the trouble. Social media are safe—too safe. They harbor us from the threat of what is unknown, unpredictable, and uncontrollable in the calm waters of being liked. Especially in cross-cultural settings, with abundant opportunities to be stretched and changed, being liked is a cheap substitute for learning to love. For that we must regularly unplug, venture outdoors, and put ourselves in real relation to real people.

“So what does it mean, spiritually, to be constantly engaged with the social media tool in one’s hand and thus in some ways only tangentially connected to the living, breathing social (and natural) network all around? To practice mindful spirituality means to watch one’s breath, to quiet oneself in order to be able to hear the still, small voice of the Spirit. Is that voice squelched by the twittering chatter of digital media?” (Jim Rice, editor of *Sojourners*, <http://blog.sojournal.net/2011/06/08/can-mindfulness-be-tweeted/>)

“Abandon your mobile phone, laptop, iPod and all such links to family, friends and work colleagues. Concentrate on where you are, deriving your entertainment from immediate stimuli, the tangible world around you. Increasingly, in hostels and guesthouses, one sees ‘independent’ travelers eagerly settling down in front of computers instead of conversing with fellow travelers. They seem only partially ‘abroad,’ unable to cut their links with home. Evidently the nanny state—and the concomitant trend among parents to over-protect offspring—has alarmingly diminished the younger generation’s self-reliance. And who is to blame for this entrapment in cyberspace? Who but the fussy folk back at base, awaiting the daily (even twice daily) email of reassurance.” (Derva Murphy <http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2009/jan/03/dervla-murphy-travel-tips?page=all>)