

Strategic Initiative Proposal

Interdisciplinary pro-seminars for students on Smith JYA programs

Janie Vanpée

Department of French Studies

This proposal builds upon the plan for **Interdisciplinary seminars for Juniors and Seniors** that Susan Van Dyne is championing as a way to provide “some sort of culminating experience for majors” while recognizing that “staffing constraints make a senior seminar impossible to mount in most departments and programs.” Susan’s proposition is also “grounded in the research that suggests students are attracted to and learn most from grappling with complex, messy problems that require multiple disciplinary perspectives and methods to analyze.” The current proposal thus addresses two of the strategic directions: *Deepen Students’ Awareness and Appreciation of Other Cultures and Global Issues* and *Promote a Culture of Research, Inquiry, and Discovery*.

Rationale:

Many of our language majors being double majors, an interdisciplinary potential is inherent in their academic program. Those who study abroad for a year (the majority) are willing to devote most of their junior year to their language major; upon return to the Smith campus their senior year, they must often focus their academic endeavors on fulfilling the requirements of their second major, which often includes a seminar. As a consequence, few of our double majors are interested, or have the time to do honors work or even the independent research required in a seminar. Furthermore, the diversity of their second major makes it hard to fashion a common culminating experience for the major in the language.

Yet, one could argue that the culminating experience of the language major takes place while abroad, particularly during their second semester when they have honed their linguistic skills enough to deepen their understanding of cultural differences and when their common experience of living abroad has helped bond them into a learning community. Such an interdisciplinary seminar could thus serve as a capstone experience to the work in the major. It would not preclude, however, more in depth or extensive work upon the student’s return to the Smith campus. Indeed, the experience of a more active engagement in the community abroad, coupled with the reflection that the interdisciplinary seminar would encourage and frame, might well inspire students to pursue their initial inquiry in greater depth upon their return.

Goals:

→ **To build on the excellence** of our study abroad programs.

→ **To distinguish our programs** from the many other study abroad programs that now exist and with which we compete.

→To offer a **unique experience** to our students to help them reflect upon and **build knowledge** from living, studying, and engaging in the community abroad.

→To **capitalize** on our programs' location by having students engage in on-site investigations or projects that bring together their linguistic skills with their growing sensitivity and understanding of cultural issues.

→To offer a framework for our students to **reflect more deeply** about their active engagement with another culture.

Format:

By offering in each of our study abroad programs an **interdisciplinary pro-seminar** in which students would come together to investigate, interrogate, and analyze a common topic or problem of current interest that takes advantage of being on site in Paris, Hamburg, Florence, Geneva, Cordoba, Kyoto or Pueblo. They would use on-site resources such as libraries, experts, volunteer organizations, as well as governmental and cultural organizations for research, interviews and contacts.

One can imagine at least **two models**.

1. In a first one, participants could each be engaged in community service work (volunteering). [Current community service work in Paris: Feeding the homeless : *Les restau du coeur*; Race and immigration issues: *SOS racisme*; Feminist and immigration issues: *Ni putes ni soumises* ; and in Florence : *Villa Lorenzi* – a youth resource center (drug or alcohol addiction); *Casa Famiglia Caritas* – a center hosting illegal immigrant mothers, and their kids; *Retirement Home Il Gignoro* ; *Youth Center Via Pietrapiana*]. Each participant would keep a journal, discuss her experience in weekly seminar meetings; together the seminar participants would define a common problem or issue that they would like to explore in greater depth.

2. In a second model, the seminar would not be tied to a community service activity. Students would identify one problem or issue that they would like the group to study in depth.

In both models, the focus of the seminar would be topical and reflect current problems, as for example, the suburban riots in France last year. Students would approach the topic from the perspective of their particular discipline and/or their particular community engagement experience. Other topics of current interest might include borders, immigration and globalization; human rights and rights of immigrants; multicultural competencies; sustainability and development.

A variation on both models model might be to choose a common theme or topic for all our programs to focus on, for example, immigration, thereby building into the experience from the beginning a cross-national discussion amongst participants on the various JYA programs.

The seminar leader would guide and direct students to possible resources, would lead discussions, but would not have to be an expert on the topic. Students could consult via

internet and webcam conferencing with professors in their discipline back on campus for more discipline-specific guidance.

Outcomes:

1. A “research in progress” round table to the Smith campus (or the French, Italian, German or Spanish departments) via video conference; the target audience would be prospective JYA students. Such video conferences would have the additional advantage of engaging students planning to study abroad more actively and reflectively.
2. A series of white papers investigating different facets of a social or cultural problem from a number of disciplinary perspectives shared among participants and posted on a website devoted to the course.
3. Upon the students’ return to campus in the fall, a symposium in which participants in these interdisciplinary seminars on all our study abroad programs would each present a short paper and engage in discussion and debate informed by their culture-specific experience.

Staffing and support:

The cost for initiating such a program would entail compensation/salary for hiring a seminar leader and for hiring an assistant charged with finding community service work and overseeing the placements. The director of the JYA program, best positioned to know both students and faculty on campus, would act as liaison between the seminar leader, students, and “experts” on campus, encouraging connections with the campus community.