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May Term Travel Courses Offer Faculty a Vivid Classroom

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Illinois Wesleyan University Professor of Biology Given Harper believes he knows the location of the best classroom on earth.

“On the edge of an extinct volcano, you can watch the sun set over the Pacific Ocean with brightly colored toucans in the trees and howler monkeys calling around you. It is virgin rainforest,” said Harper, who has been leading a contingent of students to study the rainforest of Costa Rica on and off over the last decade. “It is a chance to experience the world’s most exquisite biodiversity in a *National Geographic*-like setting.”

The trip is part of a May Term travel course – a few weeks each May when several Illinois Wesleyan professors take students to places across the globe to bring the teachings of the classroom to life. This year, 11 professors will lead students to locations from the Sistine Chapel in Italy to the rainforests of Costa Rica to businesses in Latvia. For faculty, the travels affords the chance to make their teachings jump off the textbook page.

“It is an opportunity to share passion, and to connect,” said Associate Professor of Business Administration Fred Hoyt, who will be taking 28 students abroad for his Business 360 class, focusing on business in Eastern Europe, with plans to travel to 11 countries in 21 days. “One of the amazing things for a professor is to be able to take students places they probably would not travel on their own,” said Hoyt. “When they have a chance, they are likely to travel to Italy, France and Germany, but they might not ever choose to go to Lithuania or Latvia.”

Hoyt’s assumptions about Western Europe ring true for Illinois Wesleyan students. The May Term travel course to Italy has been one of the most popular travel classes, led by Associate Professor of French and Italian Scott Sheridan since its inception 10 years ago. Sheridan considers the course as a “21st-century, fast motion, caffeinated version of the 18th century Grand Tour of continental Europe, that always culminated in Italy,” he said. Sheridan takes the students of his Literature and Culture 265 course to cities in central and northern Italy to gain a deeper understanding of the influences of the Italian Renaissance, as well as Ancient Roman and Byzantine styles. In that light, Sheridan said the travel study courses are really a “continuation of this learning tradition that is still appreciated after centuries.”

Sheridan believes that, whether traveling for a full semester or for a few weeks, travel affords a teaching tool like no other, giving faculty the opportunity to witness a student’s moment of discovery that can rarely be matched at home. “[It is] the look on the students’ faces when they see Michelangelo’s *David* for the first time,” he said. “It is their excitement when they make a connection based on what we have studied and something they see; their genuine interest in learning and taking advantage of every moment we spend in Italy.”

That moment of discovery was also key for Harper when he and IWU graduate Jeff Klemens developed the Biology 350 course in 2000 to study the tropical ecosystem in Costa Rica. “It is amazing to see their energy when we find an organism, or we can illustrate some concept we read about in a textbook,” said

Harper, whose students delve into the ecosystem of the national park known as the Area de Conservación in the Guanacaste region. “We go places the tourists cannot go,” said Harper. “Sometimes the hiking is intense, and some park stations have no electricity. It is a rainforest teeming with life and lessons.”

Klemens, Harper’s former student, returns every year with IWU students to the park, and acts a guide, interpreter and a mentoring researcher to students. A 1989 Illinois Wesleyan graduate with a double major in Biology and Spanish, he now teaches part-time at the University of Pennsylvania where he earned a doctorate degree. “Jeff and I staked out the places in Costa Rica where we would take students,” said Harper. “It is here Jeff continues his research as well.” Klemens is also the director of the Investigados del Area de Conservación Guanacaste in Costa Rica, which conducts conservation research at the national park.

The teaching opportunities during May Term travel stem from more than seeing the sites, but truly being immersed in the places, sounds, smells and tastes of another culture, said Professor of Art Kevin Strandberg. The instructor of Art 245, Strandberg takes students to the streets of Barcelona, Spain, to study urban photography. “Seeing the students develop a familiarity with the new and strange geography, culture and cuisine is really pretty exciting. I remember again how I felt when I first had that same experience,” said Strandberg, who decided to expand his own interest in street photography into the travel course. Strandberg makes sure the students are immersed in the Catalan culture, even taking in a daylong cooking class with professionals. It is one of several stops he plans for the students.

A May Term travel course generally takes a year and a half to develop from creating the curriculum to hammering out the extensive itinerary. Each element of the travel course is planned by the instructor, which can be a challenge. “Planning the logistics of the course and dealing with the educational travel companies can be very time-consuming and complicated,” said Sheridan, who plans visits and lectures in the cities of Rome, Ravenna, Urbino, Padova, Venice, Verona, Vicenza, Siena and Florence for his one course. Strandberg agreed. “Offering a travel course takes more time than anyone could possibly imagine,” he said.

Making all those plans work within a budget that fits students is another challenge for faculty who lead the courses. “As a business professor, I believe in providing value,” said Hoyt, who works with a travel agent to get the best deals for his May Term trips. “Cost has become a bigger challenge over the years, especially with growing airfare and the exchange rate. The euro was .84 cents when we started in 2002. Now the price has nearly doubled.”

All that planning is worth it, said Sheridan, who believes there is no substitute for a real-life learning experience. “The Internet and computerized multimedia are no substitute for actually experiencing the engineering feat of the Florence Duomo, or the incredible beauty of Boticelli’s ‘Birth of Venus,’” he said. Sheridan added that concepts like the Renaissance can never truly be understood in the pages of a book or the screen of a computer. “From its passion for antiquity to its contrast with the Middle Ages, the Italian *Rinascimento* represents a turning point in Western history that must be seen to be experienced.”

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