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Strengthening the Bridge Between Financial Aid and Study Abroad

By Amy Leap, Stephanie Tignor, & Evan Udowitch, Virginia Commonwealth University

This article features a case study from Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), a large, public, urban, research university, in which challenges in administering financial aid for study abroad early in the COVID-19 pandemic led the Education Abroad and Student Financial Services teams to revisit practices and protocols. This article describes compliance concerns, student service, administrative optimization, and interdepartmental relationships. The outcomes emphasize the importance of a strong, sustained partnership between university study abroad and financial aid offices, provide a framework for administrative structures in managing financial aid for study abroad programs, and highlight strategies to provide equitable study abroad opportunities.

Keywords: *study abroad, financial aid compliance, access, interdepartmental collaboration*

This article features a case study from Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in which challenges in administering financial aid for study abroad, magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic, led the university's Education Abroad (EA) and Student Financial Services (SFS) teams to strengthen a collaborative effort to address challenges including compliance, student service, administrative processes, and interdepartmental relationships. This article describes issues that were addressed and details the outcomes of their collaboration to provide a framework for other universities to develop or revisit administrative structures and services in managing financial aid for study abroad.

As a top public R1 research Minority Serving Institution (MSI) committed to diversity and access, VCU enrolls over 30,000 students in Richmond, VA. VCU's population is over 33% first generation and more than 28% of its undergraduates receive federal Pell Grants. Enrollment in 2021-2022 was 43.3% White, 18.3% Black, 13.4% Asian, 9.5% Hispanic/Latino, 6.8% Two or more races, 4.8% Not reported, 3.6% International, 0.2% American Indian/Alaskan, and 0.1% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. Due, in part, to its diverse population, VCU has seen greater diversity among its study abroad participants than are represented nationally, particularly among Black (18% in 2018-2019 compared to 6.4% nationally), Asian (14% compared to 8.9%), and Multiracial students (6% compared to 4.7%) (Fast Facts 2019; Institute of International Education 2019).

Across the nation, there is a well-documented gap in study abroad participation between White students and students of other races (Fast Facts 2019; Institute of International Education 2019). Despite steadily increasing participation in study abroad prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of minority participants, especially Black students, has been especially disproportionate to White participants. In 2019, Black students accounted for 12.6% of all U.S. undergraduates, but only 6.4% of study abroad participants. In comparison, White students accounted for 51% of all U.S. undergraduates with an overrepresentation of 68.7% among total study abroad participants (Fast Facts 2019; Institute of International Education 2019). Luo and Jamieson-Drake (2015) illustrated that finances are a major barrier to study abroad for Black students. Their research showed that Black and White students demonstrated equal levels of interest in studying abroad, but Black students were prevented from participating due to financial challenges when White students were not (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2015). Access to financial support is one important component to help close the gap between populations that do or do not study abroad (Brux & Fry, 2010).

Financial concerns are a primary barrier to study abroad participation (Dessoiff, 2006). Recent work by Whatley (2017) confirms that students with higher financial need are less likely to

participate in study abroad than their peers who do not have high financial need. With so many students with high financial need, it is important that VCU be able to promote the portability of aid to increase participation among historically underrepresented populations. Given VCU's diverse student body, the importance of funding support for study abroad participants cannot be overstated. To illustrate this point, approximately 45% of VCU students who studied abroad in the 2018-2019 academic year utilized financial aid. Access to financial support is important for participants from underrepresented backgrounds; this is particularly true for first-generation and students of color at VCU. Accessibility of aid is an important component to help close the gap between populations that do not study abroad and those that do. VCU's EA and SFS teams have a long history of partnership to support the coordination of aid for all students who wish to study abroad. Ensuring access to such important educational opportunities is a shared value of both teams and underscores their commitment to working together.

VCU Case Study: Background and Challenges

A recent, focused collaboration between SFS and EA provides a model of successful partnership between two units essential to enabling access to study abroad. Past collaborations included annual meetings, training, periodic aid/abroad advising sessions, and email correspondence regarding consortium agreements and student budgets. The 2019-2020 academic year brought a restructuring of SFS, resulting in new leadership and greater staffing, allowing for more time and attention for compliance concerns and special interests like EA.

VCU's EA team administers the university's credit-bearing international programs. Among other services, EA conducts outreach, advises students, supports faculty program development, and conducts pre-departure training. VCU typically sends hundreds of students abroad each year with over 60% participating in short-term faculty-led programs. The popularity of short-term programs has steadily increased among U.S. students (including at VCU) in recent decades due, in part, to the affordability of such programs given their shorter length and fewer credits compared to semester or full-year programs (Fast Facts 2019; Hulstrand, 2006; Institute of International Education 2019).

VCU's SFS consists of the Student Financial Management Center, the Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships, and the Office of Student Accounting. The Student Financial Management Center was established in 2020 as a one-stop hub for financial outreach, literacy, and management for students and families, and serves students at multiple campuses at VCU (Weinstein, 2020). The Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships provides services to help students afford higher education via grants, scholarships, work-study employment, and loans. The Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships administers and distributes funds from federal, state, institutional, and private fund sources, and is responsible for aid operations, compliance, and reporting. The Office of Student Accounting coordinates the assessment, billing and collection of university tuition, housing, and fees.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brought the teams together to address problems that arose for students whose study abroad plans were disrupted by cancellations and mass repatriations. Unforeseen interruptions had enormous repercussions for students' current and future aid awards and eligibility including an impact on aid unearned (but disbursed), academic continuity, and degree completion. In an effort to address immediate emergencies, the teams' close collaboration through conversations and shared spreadsheets sparked a re-evaluation of the university's processes for financial aid to students who study abroad and a renewed dedication to understanding regulatory and institutional practices.

In recognizing that there were deficiencies in process flows, and in light of internal changes in SFS, the two offices used the pandemic as an opportunity to do a full reset. While the Student

Financial Management Center provided counseling, it was observed that staff who once completed aid adjustments no longer had those functional responsibilities. The Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships, having undergone staffing changes, had only two administrators familiar with study abroad processing, including the department director.

The Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships director initiated the collaboration by asking which programs had been approved to offer federal financial aid. EA and SFS reviewed the study abroad programs available to students (approximately 278) to confirm that the schools were listed on the Postsecondary Education Participants System (PEPS) website. Since PEPS maintains eligibility of all schools that participate in federal Title IV programs, VCU needed to understand which programs necessitated a consortium or contractual agreement. The importance of this distinction speaks to the level of compliance risk when VCU grants permission to a student who wishes to take part in a program abroad. While a consortium agreement is a written agreement between two or more Title IV eligible schools, a contractual agreement is a written agreement between an eligible school and an ineligible school (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Federal Student Aid, 2020-2021). The risk associated from a financial aid perspective varies, and there is risk to the academic unit responsible for evaluating if a student is earning acceptable credit towards their program of study, as students can receive Federal Student Aid funds only for courses that apply to their degree program.

To continue minimizing risk for VCU and students, the teams explored other topics, such as how student program budgets would be calculated when cost of living and length of program varies. A “one size fits all” approach does not work due to the variety of programs available and the difference between program budgets and on campus cost of attendance. Differences related to varying inclusions on site (such as housing or meals) impacted the total cost of attendance. Furthermore, an undergraduate student’s study abroad budget at VCU is based upon the cost with enrollment in 12-credits; however, the student may decide to enroll in more (or fewer) credits. These scenarios opened up processes for SFS and EA to reconfigure.

Pre-departure course approval processes, including course equivalency and credit transfer expectations, were reviewed, due to minimum enrollment requirements for financial aid, which also impact the student budget. The teams also addressed enrollment verification within VCU’s add/drop period since VCU knows when an on-campus student drops a course, because the home system reports in real-time. Abroad, however, VCU is dependent on the student and host school relaying that information back by key deadlines. If a student drops (a) course(s) before starting class, their level of enrollment and subsequent aid eligibility for a Pell Grant or loan is impacted. If enrollment verification does not occur until after the foreign transcript arrives from abroad, it could adversely impact aid.

Measuring applicable, attempted credit hours is a requirement for federal student aid (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Federal Student Aid, 2020-2021). The risk of students changing courses while abroad and not communicating it to the home school creates a risk of improperly awarding aid. Recognizing these risks, SFS did not want to lose the opportunity to have a conversation before departure or to be informed when students decide to change their schedule.

Disbursement of aid is determined based on program start date. The Federal Student Aid Handbook is clear that a school cannot disburse funds more than 10 days before the first day of class (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Federal Student Aid, 2020-2021). Each host school has unique start and end dates that differ from VCU. From an aid operations standpoint, a precise recording of a program’s start date is critical to remain in compliance and disburse aid in a timely manner.

Intermediary billing arrangements and understanding student charges is a unique challenge. VCU does not assess charges to students through the Student Accounting Office for every program.

For programs that are billed through VCU, receiving updated invoices to reflect enrollment changes is critical to ensure that aid is paid out correctly. For students billed directly by the host institution, financial aid is disbursed to VCU and then refunded to the student to pay the host school. The host school expects payment from the student, whether it is coming directly from VCU or the student. They want to ensure payment when the bill is due. Aid must be disbursed on time, in the correct amount, reported at the correct enrollment level, and based on the cost to go abroad.

All the challenges and solutions VCU continues to work towards must be understood by everyone involved in the study abroad process. Outcomes of this collaboration are detailed in the following section.

Outcomes and Broader Strategy for Success

Collaborations between VCU's EA and SFS teams led to beneficial outcomes for students and administrators. Through bi-weekly team meetings, the teams have closer working relationships. In the past two years, the teams have developed new processes and updated all forms for compliance and consistency, including the Consortium/Contractual Agreement, Student Budgets, and Enrollment Verification forms (see Appendix). EA and SFS created a shared Google Sheet to track the progress of these processes for each student and have a new Shared Drive for storing and sharing files to minimize emails back and forth, which often results in lost paperwork. EA and SFS have detailed financial aid processes on the website and in pre-departure orientations. Students are better informed about administrative processes to ensure that they are properly enrolled and funded for study abroad. VCU is now in better compliance with federal, state, and institutional requirements for utilization of financial aid and scholarships. VCU clarified student communications to ensure understanding and cooperation with necessary steps.

To address the financial barriers of study abroad, EA aims to offer affordable programs with clear funding options, and to educate students early and often about financing study abroad. Affordable faculty-led programs, available in many majors, typically account for over 60% of total participation. EA is also developing major advising sheets to promote a selection of approved, affordable, and major-appropriate programs that are integrated into the curriculum for each major at VCU. Additionally, financial aid deferral forms and intermediary billing agreements allow students to use their financial aid for a greater number of programs. These new resources and processes fit into VCU's broader strategy for success in increasing access to study abroad.

VCU's innovative and strategic funding opportunities such as its airfare voucher program generated through employee airline points and experiential learning awards offered through academic departments, support the overall strategy to address financial barriers. VCU's National Scholarship Office works with students applying to the Boren, Critical Language, and Gilman scholarships, and other nationally competitive scholarships. VCU highlights the Gilman Scholarship to reach its large Pell population. EA has a strong partnership with TRiO and offers writing workshops to support students applying for scholarships in collaboration with the National Scholarship Office. EA has hosted grant-funded passport events and works closely with the Military Student Services Office to advise students of the restrictions of using veterans benefits while abroad.

Conclusions, Future Considerations, and Implications for Practice

International educators and financial aid officers must be more proactive in shoring up their processes so as not to become stagnant in what has been done in the past. This case study serves as a reminder to institutions to reexamine their own practices to ensure compliance and to prioritize support for each student.

As study abroad numbers begin to increase again, VCU anticipates revisiting these new processes to ensure they thrive with increased caseloads. Looking forward, VCU will continue identifying ways to make study abroad accessible to all through aid and innovative funding opportunities. As new staff are onboarded, training on collaborative processes and efficiency are a priority. Like VCU, universities seeking to revisit their own practices and processes should examine interdepartmental communications, standardization of all processes, customer service concerns, compliance with federal and state regulations, and education of staff regarding processes to promote ongoing, continuous dialogue for optimal compliance, communication, and service to students. VCU remains committed to collaboration by meeting regularly and continuously pursuing improvements. The work of supporting study abroad participants is ongoing, cyclical, and requires awareness of regulations, trends, and evolving best practices. Examining differences in interpretation of regulations and identifying innovative methods among peers in breaking down barriers to study abroad is also a recommended practice.

Ultimately, a strong partnership between international education and financial aid professionals to commit to the difficult but rewarding work of supporting students in gaining access to education abroad is an important component. VCU provides a collaborative framework for other universities to develop or revisit their own structures and services to address challenges in administering financial aid for study abroad and to ensure compliance. This work is essential to enable financial access for students to participate in global learning, which has the power to transform lives and shape the world.

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Appendix

Consortium/Contractual Agreement



VCU Education Abroad
 Global Education Office
 Grace Street Center, 4th Floor
 912 West Grace St.
 PO Box 843043
 Richmond, VA 23284
 abroad@vcu.edu

Host University
 Host Address Line 1
 Host Address Line 2
 Host Contact E-mail

Student name has received approval from Virginia Commonwealth University to take coursework at **Host University** in **Term Year**.

If applicable for **Student name** to receive Financial Aid to cover the cost of studies at **Host University**, Virginia Commonwealth University and **Host University** agree to the following:

- The student is pursuing a degree at Virginia Commonwealth University; therefore, the student may attend **Host University** as a special (non-degree seeking) student and may only be eligible for federal and state financial aid through Virginia Commonwealth University.
- If the student is offered private financial assistance by **Host University**, a copy of the award offer must be mailed to the VCU Financial Aid Department, P.O. Box 843026, 1015 Floyd Ave, 1st Floor, Richmond, VA 23284-3026.
- If the student withdraws prior to completion of the academic period, **Host University** will notify the VCU Global Education Office (email abroad@vcu.edu; telephone 804-828-7882) within ten (10) days of the withdrawal.
- If the withdrawal results in a refund to the student, the refund check will be made payable to Virginia Commonwealth University and be mailed to the VCU Financial Aid Department, P.O. Box 843026, 1015 Floyd Ave, 1st Floor, Richmond, Virginia 23284-3026.
- The appropriate distribution of financial aid accounts will be made in accordance with VCU policies. Failure to return this form in a timely manner may impede financial aid disbursement.

At the end of the academic period and with permission of the student, Host University will issue and mail (or e-mail) directly to the VCU Education Abroad Office (addresses above) an official transcript of all courses taken and grades received, whether passed, failed, incomplete or withdrawn. Should a student signature be required to release transcripts, Host University will obtain the necessary information from the student prior to the program's end.

If applicable, Financial Aid for **Student name** will be disbursed 10 days prior to the official program start date, provided that a properly executed Consortium Agreement between **Host University** and Virginia Commonwealth University has been received by the Global Education Office.

Advisor, VCU Education Abroad Date

Authorized Signature, **Host University** Date

Budget



Individual Student Budget Form

Student Name:

Student Number:

Program Type:

Consortium Agreement Needed:

Program Name:

Country:

Program Dates: to

Program Term:

Program Fee (Tuition & Fees):	\$	<input type="text"/>
Room & Board:	\$	<input type="text"/>
Books & Supplies:	\$	<input type="text"/>
Airfare:	\$	<input type="text"/>
Travel Insurance:	\$	<input type="text"/>
Miscellaneous:	\$	<input type="text"/>
(Includes immigration fees, local transportation, health insurance, etc.)		
Total:	\$	<input type="text" value="0.00"/>

Comments:

Education Abroad Advisor: Date:

Global Education Office

Phone: 804-827-7882

Fax: 804-828-2552

Email: abroad@vcu.edu

Enrollment Verification

Spring 2022, Enrollment Verification & Confirmation of Courses

TO BE FILLED OUT BY STUDENT	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deadline: Within 30 days of VCU add/drop • Return the signed form to the Education Abroad Office: abroad@vcu.edu (scanned, or a clear photo) • Be aware that enrolling in <u>less than</u> VCU equivalent full time credit hours could impact your scholarship(s) and/or financial aid award disbursement • In order to receive transfer credit, you must receive a "C" or higher in your coursework. 	
Name of Host Institution (issuing your transcript):	Host Country:
Name of Course at Host Institution	# of Host Institution Credits
Verification of Enrollment: My signature below affirms that I am enrolled in and attending the courses listed above.	
Confirmation of Courses: I affirm I will immediately contact VCU Education Abroad if my enrollment changes.	
Student Last, First Name (print)	Date
V Number	Student Signature
E-mail	

TO BE FILLED OUT BY HOST INSTITUTION		
<i>(a certified staff member who can confirm the student's enrollment)</i>		
I certify that this student is enrolled in the courses listed above and that they are attending classes. <input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO Comments:		
Host Institution Name	Type of Credit (ex. ECTS)	Signature & Date
Name Authorized Signer (print)		
Position Title		
Email		

Education Abroad Office, Virginia Commonwealth University
 912 West Grace Street, 4th Floor, Box 843043, Richmond, VA 23284, USA
 Tel.: 804-828-8471, FAX: 804-828-2552

