

## AIFS Abroad Study Brief

### **University of Kentucky’s “Explore First”: Career Readiness and Academic Self-Efficacy in First-Generation College Student Programming**

*Explore First is a University of Kentucky program administered in conjunction with AIFS Abroad overseas programs in the United Kingdom and Ireland.*

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#### **Describe the guiding assumptions and framework of the University of Kentucky “Explore First” program**

The “Explore First” program was designed to support first-generation students’ career readiness through study abroad. As Stephen and I considered how to develop a research plan for the program, we wanted to stay grounded in the goals that guided the program’s broader design: meet first-gen students where they are and support their career exploration.

First-generation students often encounter financial, academic, and social hurdles that their peers from college-educated families may not experience, including limited funding and resources, lower college readiness, and a lack of familial guidance in navigating the college experience. To us, these broader challenges were important to consider, because they helped to frame our later assumptions about study abroad participation and career readiness.

Also, first-generation students are less likely to participate in study abroad programs than their continuing-generation peers. They may have fewer financial resources, more family or community responsibilities that keep them at home, or a pervading sense that studying abroad isn’t for them. Given the proven impacts of study abroad—increased global awareness, intercultural competence, independence, etc.—this inequitable access is troubling.

Finally, first-generation students may struggle with career readiness. They may lack social network connections to certain professions, access to career readiness resources, cross-cultural skills, and are less likely to be able to participate in career-preparatory activities like internships, which are often unpaid.

These assumptions underscore the need for targeted support and intervention—and an appropriately framed research design—to help first-gen students overcome these challenges and fully engage in study abroad. Therefore, we developed a multi-method research design that engaged two research questions: *How does Explore First contribute to: 1) career readiness, and 2) academic self-efficacy.*

We also wanted to implement a data collection plan that was rigorous but not overwhelming for students or program leaders. So, we opted for in-class activities that were quick but impactful, such as Post Cards (postcard-sized reflection prompts) to quickly capture students’ reflections on the day’s activities or lessons. Example career-related prompts included:

- 1) What was the most poignant thing you learned during the resume workshop?
- 2) Now that you have visited an international company with connections to Kentucky, what are you thinking about in relation to local-global connections and the workforce?
- 3) Take a moment to reflect on your career goals. Have they changed at all since the program started?

Finally, because we know that pre-to-post quantitative data on growth that is self-reported can be biased (because people often rate themselves higher than they may actually be), we implemented a survey design that invited students to self-evaluate at *three* points: prior to departure, midway through the program, and after returning home. Our motivation for administering a mid-program survey, even on a short-term program, was to address concerns of pre-survey inflation—we assumed that students would rate themselves higher in the pre-survey than was reflective of their actual behaviors. By inviting students to complete the survey reflectively at the mid-point of their program (“Reflecting back to the beginning of the experience, [...] rate the degree to which the statement represents your behaviors:”), they could then provide a more realistic assessment of their behaviors prior to departure. Finally, as the program took place in the early Summer, a delayed post-program survey allowed students to settle back into their normal routines before considering the impact of the program since returning. We believe this painted a more accurate picture of the program’s impacts on student learning.

**What have you discovered from these first 120 students on the Explore First program?**

The impact of Explore First on these students has been immense, and our research probably only captures a sliver of that impact. Quantitatively, students showed growth in all four assessed areas: academic self-efficacy and three areas of career readiness, including career preparation, job search skills, and workplace effectiveness.

Stephen’s forthcoming dissertation highlights this exciting growth for our Summer 2024 cohort:

	<i>Academic Self-Efficacy</i>	<i>Career Preparedness</i>	<i>Job Search Skills</i>	<i>Workplace Effectiveness</i>	<i>Overall Average</i>
<i>Pre (N=50)</i>	4.8	4.7	4.4	5.1	4.8
<i>Mid (N=54)</i>	5.1	5.0	4.9	5.3	5.1
<i>Post (N=46)</i>	5.2	5.3	5.3	5.5	5.3

This table shows two important findings. First, students demonstrated growth in all four assessed categories. Second, our mid-survey proved incredibly useful, as students *did not* respond in the way we anticipated (more on that later!).

Qualitatively, students shared promising revelations around their career expectations and goals. As we anticipated, students reported feeling a sense of “expanded possibilities,” including feelings of hope, opportunity, and direction for their future career trajectories. Some sample responses include:

- “After visiting international companies, I feel as though obtaining jobs in Ireland and other countries is possible. It has caused me to expand my mindset when thinking about future careers.”
- “My career goals have expanded a lot in terms of looking at more opportunities. The ideas I have now for career goals have been thought of before, but I didn't think it was possible until now.”
- “As an English major, I felt stuck between being a teacher/professor or becoming a lawyer. On the very first day, these expectations that I had put on myself were broken, because they immediately talked about how accounting firms want English majors. This made me feel less restricted in my choices. My career goal now is to find a career that is fit for me, not just my major.”

Second, several students reported a newfound sense of the importance of finding work with “value” or meaning to them. Their reflections communicated how students had learned to think about their future career in new ways, particularly in that they had a newfound appreciation for and goal of finding work that is personally meaningful and not just financially gainful. Sample responses include:

- “I think that it is possible to work for an international company that still makes you feel at-home. Even if a company has an office in another country, the core values can still be the same as in the place it was founded.”
- “I like the value that is placed on work-life balance in Europe. In America, we work ourselves to death and for what? Life is meant to be lived. Work to live, don't live to work.”
- “...The balance between work and self-care was very impressive. The supportive environment gives me high standards for where I want to work.”
- “My goals before the trip were just to make as much money as possible. Now it is more important that I enjoy my job and have room to grow.”

Finally, some students noted their professional and personal realities had been reframed by the program, reflecting a change in how students saw themselves and their professional futures. Sample responses include:

- “I think that I will have no problem being in a company that works with people globally in different locations because I see now that networking and communication across different cultures and countries isn't that scary.”
- “I did not realize how connected things are globally. I would have never thought that a company based in London would have roots in Lexington. It makes me feel better about a future career and it helped me realize I have more options than I thought.”
- “I know what I want, and I am going to get it no matter what it takes. I think this trip has pulled the best parts of me out and I am striving to be better.”

- “Being first-gen is a gift.”

*Being first-gen is a gift.* That’s a powerful statement that showcases the impact of Explore First and that motivates us to continue this important work so that other first-generation students can feel the same!

### **What, if anything, has surprised you?**

Explore First’s impacts on student self-efficacy and career readiness are not surprising to us—the program was intentionally designed around these learning outcomes. However, students did not behave as we anticipated in the quantitative surveys. While we hypothesized that students would rate themselves high(er than reality) at the pre-survey, their mid-survey averages were actually HIGHER than their pre-survey averages. To us, this may relate to research on first-generation students that shows their lack of confidence or sense of self-efficacy. Our findings suggest that these students were perhaps not aware of their own strengths prior to traveling but were made aware of them while on the program. This was a fun finding with important implications for research on first-generation student learning!

### **How is the University of Kentucky population uniquely suited to this research?**

UK is a nationally recognized leader in first-generation student supports and international programs. The university is a [First-Gen Forward](#) designated institution, and the Explore First program itself has been recognized with awards from [NASPA](#), a national organization for student affairs administrators in higher education. The university also received the [2023 Simon Award for Outstanding Campus Internationalization](#) from NAFSA: Association of International Educators. And alongside these recognitions, the university’s first-generation student population has grown year over year, as has its robust catalogue of study abroad program offerings. Combine these realities with an administration, staff, and faculty dedicated to first-generation student success—it makes for the perfect site for this research! We hope that other institutions like UK will see our work with Explore First, and the research study embedded within the curriculum, as a model for responsive study abroad programming to support first-generation and other marginalized students.

### **What are you most excited about as your research in this space continues?**

The amount of students who are the first in their families to go to college is continuing to grow. As a first-generation student myself, I (Kayla) had my life changed forever because of my own study abroad experience. Seeing the same phenomenon playing out with these students is an incredible feeling that gives me the energy to push forward with important research on the power of study abroad programming for first-generation and other marginalized students. We are excited to continue following each Explore First cohort year after year, and to produce some data on how the program continues to evolve and shape students’ experiences and outcomes. This year, we will be adding some new questions and methods, such as exploring the extent to which the program shapes students’ interculturally competent behavior upon returning to campus, as well as some systematic

documentation of what it takes to develop, implement, and assess a program like Explore First. We hope that our programming and research can be taken up by other institutions!

**Why is research about the first-generation student population important in the higher ed landscape today?**

Research on first-generation college students helps us to shed light on the unique challenges these students face and informs strategies to support their success. By understanding these challenges, institutions can implement targeted support systems, such as mentorship programs, financial aid initiatives, and academic resources, to improve retention and graduation rates, students' sense of belonging, and other critically important academic and cocurricular outcomes.

Research like ours also contributes to more equitable policies that can bridge gaps in access to higher education and high impact practices like study abroad, ensuring that first-gen students have the tools they need to succeed and thrive in college.