Global Experiential Learning

Global Experiential Learning (GEL) integrates travel, education, and service learning to empower students with knowledge, skills, and values to use as they continue their careers at the University of Arizona (UA) and beyond. GEL strives to create more intentional, inclusive, and culturally responsive immersion programs for all UA students. GEL is committed to increasing access and participation for students who are from historically marginalized identities and who are also underrepresented within study abroad programs: Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC); first generation college students; students from low-income households; and LGBTQ+ identified students. Study abroad research illustrated that white students outnumbered students of color studying abroad by a significant 4 to 1 ratio (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2014). Additionally, the 2016-2017 UA Factbook, the year before GEL was established, reported that only 425 students identified as students of color participated in study abroad of the 36,390 UA undergraduates. This is equivalent to a low 1% BIPOC representation of students studying abroad. These staggering statistics showcase why GEL was created and needs to be maintained. The program supports the need for an institutional inclusion and diversity shift that will not only impact the participants, but also to advance the UA campus as a whole.

GEL intentionally removes institutional barriers that may prevent a student from participating in study abroad programs. For those coming from underrepresented backgrounds, barriers may include the lack of exposure to traveling abroad, financial cost, program duration, and familial/personal obligations. To remedy this, GEL provides short term programs that align with UA breaks in winter, spring, and summer as to not interfere with student degree completion. GEL also works to keep program costs low by providing direct student scholarships, seeking additional funding sources, subsidizing staff costs, and offering free local programming and base priced domestic and international programs.

GEL provides international and domestic experiential learning opportunities to undergraduate and graduate students in a tiered format so programs are accessible for all students. The tiered programs vary in length of time, cost, and locations. International programs have included experiences in Southeast Asia and Mexico exploring diverse history, people, and culture. GEL also provides rich cultural opportunities domestically that are both local and out of state (i.e., Hawaii) so students who do not have the opportunity to travel outside the USA, such as students with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) can also participate in these valuable experiences. Local programs provide experiences in our own state of Arizona as we learn from places like the Arizona/Sonora border and the Tribal communities of the Navajo, Apache, Hopi, and the Tohono O’odham Nations. Since the beginning of GEL, the student-centered programming has increased from 2 programs to over 30 unique programs and continues to adapt to students’ current interests. For many of these participants, it was their first time abroad, on a plane, or even out of Arizona. This life changing experience included in-depth experiential learning of histories and cultures that they were never taught in their traditional classroom settings. GEL programs offer students the opportunity to travel and engage with matters of social justice, environmental justice, multicultural competency, and service learning. Students examine personal identities such as race, ethnicity, and religion to see how their identities are impacted when traveling to diverse communities and exposure to different cultures.

GEL has actively increased opportunities for underrepresented populations through strong collaborations with the Thrive Center, College of Education, UA Global Micro-campuses, Student Success and Retention Innovation, and UA Cultural and Resource Centers, as well as multiple higher education institutions. Students and staff from these areas have attended and co-led GEL programs, and these collaborations have created a pipeline of students interested in GEL programs. Additionally, diverse staff are embedded into the GEL learning components of career development and health and wellness. During the program, staff assists students by helping them translate and relate their experiences to their career as well as catering to the unique needs of culturally sensitive health and wellness practices that include such processes as indigenous healing. Uniquely, GEL also focuses on graduate students by not only hiring them, but also has graduate students as participants,
especially for those that have not had these opportunities due to the institutional barriers in their undergraduate career. GEL participants not only benefit through learning about the culture, history and people of the places they visit, but past participants shared that they also benefited from learning about multiple cultures through the diversity of the group. These diverse groups have had individuals that identified as BIPOC, first generation, low-income, and LGBTQ+. In this COVID-19 global pandemic, GEL has expanded to provide informational webinars and global internships to outreach to more participants.

Due to travel restrictions and social distancing guidelines brought on by the pandemic, GEL had to cut its programming short with our last travel experience in March of 2020. Although we were unable to provide all our intended programming, we were still able to have 158 students participate in our programs. 94% of GEL participants identified as a student of color and 72% identify as first generation. In fall 2020, GEL adapted its programming to a virtual webinar series showcasing distinguished stories of community, culture, and international connections in the Tucson community and beyond. We hosted 12 virtual webinar series reaching 688 total users. With the significant participation in our webinars that allow students to virtually travel around the world with GEL, we are planning to continue the original programs of GEL and foresee students are ready and have a vested interest in participating in GEL programs once we are allowed to travel again.

GEL programming works with two broad success indicators in mind. The first being specific student outcomes that include student graduation rates and academic persistence. To assess these indicators, GEL evaluates graduation and academic persistence trends among the GEL program participants as a part of every program through pre and post assessments. The second indicator is the assessment of student reflections and testimonials through program assignments. Students are also given the opportunity to bring back the experience through presentations and poster sessions at the annual GEL Symposium, which showcases the impact of these programs to the entire campus. By assessing student outcomes and sharing these with the SSF board in our funding requests, SSF has supported GEL to significantly grow the number of sites and the amount of participants. For the 2020 Southeast Asia Study Abroad program, GEL received 50 applications for the 16 student spots. Additionally, we received 90 applications for the 32 student spots for the 2020 Alternative Spring Break Hawaii program, showcasing the true interest for these specific programs.

Throughout the tenue of GEL, we have continued to seek out additional funding sources to support students. Our ongoing data analyses in linking student success to experiential education participation has allowed GEL to obtain funding from student support departments on campus. In previous years, we were able to secure additional funding from partnerships with SSRI, Thrive Center, College of Education, and the Dean of Students Office and are invested to seek similar funding through collaborative efforts in the future. GEL will also be applying to multiple grants such as the UA Provost Investment Fund and IDEAS (Increase and Diversify Education Abroad for U.S. Students) grants to assure a sustainable longevity for GEL. It is our hope to support the University of Arizona and Enrollment Management mission through offering this unique global experiential programming that fosters positive student success outcomes, improves the student experience, provides a diverse and inclusive education, increases retention efforts, and increases access and participation of global programming for all UA students with a focus on historically marginalized students. In conclusion, we would like to provide a student perspective of the purpose and impact of GEL through this quote by GEL participant Dzoara Ruiz, Senior in Biology and Spanish Translation and Interpretation who identifies as Latina, first generation, and low income.

“I never really traveled, especially abroad because my family never did and we didn’t have the money. I always knew it [study abroad] existed, but I didn’t think it was for me. It [study abroad] was like a door I knew was there, but I didn’t know how to open it, so I never sought it out. GEL not only gave me the opportunity and tools to travel, but it also gave me a different perspective and context of the world I live in and on the learning I am doing at the University. GEL has helped me realize that there are people that are willing to listen to my needs because my path is different, and that is okay. GEL has not only changed me, but also my family, friends, and my future.”