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CRAIG T. COBANE AND DERICK B. STRODE

# Literary New England: Planning and Implementing Domestic Travel Study

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## ABSTRACT

Domestic travel courses provide honors programs/colleges a variety of educational opportunities to immerse students in a culture different from their own. This essay presents one example of an honors-sponsored domestic travel course and discusses its differences from and similarities to study abroad courses. Additionally, we discuss the various elements that go into conceiving, developing, and executing such an educational experience. The essay is structured to provide a roadmap for creating a domestic travel course.

## BACKGROUND

Over the past several years the Honors Program at Western Kentucky University (WKU) has seen a growth of over 200% in its freshman class while at the same time increasing its admission standards and building a reputation for its innovative courses. Expansion in the number of students has also occurred in the university at large, which has undergone a decade-long growth trend and continues to be one of the fastest growing institutions in the region, reaching 19,215 total students in the fall of 2007. The combination of a larger, stronger institution and the ongoing development of the Honors Program led to the transformation of the program into an Honors College in the summer of 2007.

Like most honors experiences, the WKU Honors College encourages and supports a range of study abroad courses and experiential learning opportunities for all its students. The Honors College is distinguishing itself through its willingness to be experimental in its course offerings. The summer of 2007 featured a new addition: an honors course designed like a study abroad course but focused domestically. This course, Literary New England, was what we call a "domestic travel study."

## DOMESTIC TRAVEL STUDY VS. STUDY ABROAD

Literary New England personified the values of the WKU Honors College by combining features of experiential learning, critical thinking, and creative activity with a conscious effort to develop collegial associations between students,

## LITERARY NEW ENGLAND

faculty, and staff. Additionally, successful completion of the course required reflective analysis (through a blog-based personal travel journal), independent thinking and research (manifested in a post-travel research paper), and team-based participation throughout the travel itself. The course was co-organized and facilitated by a longtime honors faculty member from the English department and a graduate intern from the Honors College (the essay's second author). Because Literary New England drew upon the Honors College's philosophy of engaging students, it depended heavily for pre-travel advice and support from the Director of the Honors College (the essay's first author), who served as a sounding board for ideas, assisted in getting much needed administrative assistance from several departments on campus, and provided financial support for the trip.

The trip featured experiential learning spread out over fourteen full days of travel in New England visiting various American literary, historical, and cultural sites. Students were asked to go beyond analyzing the literature (as they would do in a classroom) by linking literary ideas to place, culture, and time. One student made the connection evident when he wrote, "I was walking where Thoreau and Emerson walked on the shores of Walden Pond, I breathed in the cold ocean air as Melville once did, and I traced the curves and angles of Hawthorne's own handwriting with my index finger. How much closer can someone get to these literary geniuses of nineteenth-century America?" On completion of the course, students earned three hours of honors credit, the same as a three-week, concentrated May-term course on campus.

The course organizers, realizing that one of the primary advantages of education abroad is experiential learning, sought to apply this immersion pedagogy domestically. Domestic travel courses involve almost every element of planning that a study abroad includes (minus passports, money exchanges, and sometimes language barriers). At the completion of the trip, the consensus of the faculty, staff, and students (those with previous study abroad experience) was that domestically focused experiential learning can be as powerful an educational experience as international travel. One student commented, "This trip [. . .] has shown me that some of the greatest treasures for a student of literature aren't necessarily located in London or anywhere else in Europe; they are here in our backyard. Literature is no longer this far-away concept for me; it is something tangible and close to home. I don't need a passport to reconnect with my studies on a physical level."

For students interested in American literature, the course provided the fresh option of studying their genre on site. Like students on a study abroad trip, students in this course, most of whom were from Kentucky, learned about cultural differences—in this case between New England and their home culture. Students saw unfamiliar architectural styles, heard accents and word usages different from those of their peers at home, and, perhaps most importantly, experienced a culture of proximate history in New England that scarcely exists in Kentucky. New England provided the class a place where noted authors sometimes lived next door to one another and where students could walk across

lawns between historic sites. Immersed in New England's abundance of storied American Revolutionary sites, students found themselves in a culture where academia met reality. As one student stated in her blog, "As I turned the pages filled with handwriting hundreds of years old, I could not help but finally feel connected to these great writers." Such reactions demonstrate the success of the experiential learning style of Literary New England.

Another component of international travel that domestic travel mimics is the interdisciplinary nature of learning. Focusing on the concentration of literary opportunities that New England offers, students inadvertently learned lessons across a range of disciplines. For example, while visiting Stellwagen Bank for whale watching, students had an unexpected biology lesson about the anatomy, life spans, and feeding habits of several species of whales. This lesson intertwined with the literature, prompting one student to write, "I now understand the line from *Moby Dick*, 'The birds, the birds, they mark the spot,' because seagulls will circle the spot where the whales are feeding." On Nantucket Island, the group spent an evening with a guest lecturer who discussed telescope making and the history of astronomy in the United States. One student's reflection upon the evening led her to comment, "I learned more about astronomy in one night than I did in an entire semester." American history and American art infiltrated students' study as a linking theme of each site visit. Students talked with Wampanoag American Indians at Plimoth Plantation and visited an Edward Hopper exhibit at the Museum of Fine Art in Boston. Students' final papers connected Hopper's art to Longfellow's home and poetry, generated discussion about private and public ownership of literary sites, and pulled in themes of education, history, and politics that supported the literary focus. Boundaries between American literature, geography, curatorial work, the sciences, history, culture, and society blurred into a fusion of learning the same way that study abroad trips offer more educational value than what is written in the course description.

The university treated Literary New England as a study abroad experience in issues related to risk management including the requirement that all extended academic trips must have at least two faculty or staff members, preferably of opposite genders. On Sunday, May 13, 2007, eleven students and three staff members (two males and one female) flew from Kentucky into Manchester, New Hampshire, where two rented vans were waiting at the airport. These vans provided the group's transportation for the trip with two exceptions: a two-day stay in Boston when the group relied solely on public transportation and a visit to Nantucket Island when they relied on ferry and foot travel while the vans waited on the mainland.

Just as students travel to Florence to study art and Costa Rica to study biology, students traveled to Massachusetts to study literature. The proximity and concentration of sites allowed a number of American literary and historical sites to be visited—sometimes at a rate of three places a day—during the trip. Visits centered on the course's required reading. For example, Herman Melville's

## LITERARY NEW ENGLAND

*Moby Dick* was accentuated by a four-hour-long whale-watching excursion from Gloucester, Massachusetts, a weekend trip to Nantucket Island (where the whaling industry had reached its height in the mid-nineteenth century), and finally to Arrowhead Farm, Melville's homestead in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where he wrote this great novel. (See Appendix B for a full list of sites.)

### FUNDING

Trip organizers wanted to limit each student's cost to \$1500. This revenue was the primary source of funding, but supplemental funds for the trip were also necessary. New England offered an endless bounty of options such as the aforementioned weekend trip to Nantucket Island, the whale-watching excursion, and a pub tour of Revolutionary Boston. To overcome the limits of finance, the planners of the trip sought external funding from multiple university departments. Supplemental funding came from the Honors College, the English Department, the Potter College of Arts and Letters, the Office of Graduate Studies and Research, and the Student Government Association. Administrative support was provided by the WKU Division of Extended Learning and Outreach (DELO), which also assisted logistically in finalizing travel arrangements, communicating the trip's budget to its planners, and paying the bills. At the trip's end, DELO, which managed the course's general account, reported a small surplus of money in the course's budget. The excess money was recycled back into the general fund to support future travel study courses.

DELO was instrumental in keeping an accurate account of money spent versus money in the general course budget by providing one of their staff members to travel along as part of the trip's leadership team. DELO is interested in taking on more budgeting and logistical support roles for future travel study trips at WKU and believed there were multiple advantages to be gained by offering a staff member. Not only could they assist in carrying out the prescribed budget of the trip, but they could also see the travel study through all its phases. The pre-trip planning became an additional learning opportunity because the entire process (i.e., negotiating room prices, bartering services for lower room rates, and staying in facilities other than hotels or motels) became an educational experience for students who did not realize the issues involved in planning a trip such as this one. At pre-trip meetings, students got updates on where they would be going and staying and which university departments were pitching in to sponsor the trip. The trip organizers also shared with the students the time and effort needed to organize a two-week trip.

### TIMELINE OF PLANNING

Specific planning for the May 2007 trip began as early as November 2006, some seven months before the travel actually took place. By December 2006, a rough itinerary was created to allow for lodging reservations to be made. When students returned from winter break in January 2007, recruitment began immediately to attract a gender-balanced group of honors students, thus easing

room assignments. By March 2007, the roster was finalized; students had submitted their applications, signed their waivers of liability, and paid their deposits. Because the anticipated revenue was established, specific site visits and reservations could be made. Special tours were arranged with on-site experts (such as a visit to view American literary manuscripts at Harvard University's Houghton Library), group airfare rates were finalized, and the rental vans were reserved.

## LODGING

Lodging for the trip was one of the earliest considerations in planning. The trip leaders considered hotels and motels only as a last resort, believing that other options would encourage more community building among the group and lend more character to the trip. Finding places to stay that would offer common areas for class discussions was a necessity. Having one central location to stay the entire time might have been an option; however, the top choice for such a location could not accommodate the group for two weeks. In the end, four separate lodgings were booked: a rural hostel on the suburban fringe of Boston; a Nantucket Island research facility; an urban Boston hostel; and a Berkshire retreat center. (See Appendix C for specific comments on lodgings.) This combination of lodging facilities added character and charm to the stay; most importantly, it fostered community building among students through the use of shared commons areas. Classes were held in the evenings. Because the rooms, in all cases, were without televisions and computers, students sought each other's company.

Planning a trip for honors students provided significant advantages to the organizers. Every phone conversation began with brief descriptions of the academic intent of Literary New England and of the honors students. The mention of honors students dispelled concerns about typical "student field trips" and helped planners negotiate cost-saving deals. For example, at both the rural hostel and retreat center, money was saved by having students vacuum their rooms and strip their beds before checking out. Trip planners were convinced that these negotiations were possible because managers assumed that honors students were more mature and could be trusted as good visitors. At the research center in Nantucket, the group was given access to parts of the facility not normally open to student groups; the students were allowed, for instance, to do their laundry at the center for free. Finally, planners selected lodgings with usable kitchens to allow students to prepare meals some evenings instead of eating out.

## PRE-TRIP COMMUNITY BUILDING

Because community building plays such a vital role in the success of group trips, strategies to foster familiarity and friendships before traveling (what the Honors College calls collegial associations) began two months before the trip. Students were expected to have all the assigned works read prior to the

## LITERARY NEW ENGLAND

trip. Pre-trip classes met four separate times to start discussion of the works. Students had a forum to discuss with planners and classmates not only the literature they were reading but also questions about the trip. During these four class meetings, students learned each other's names and gained some knowledge about their classmates in a relaxed classroom setting. As a final pre-trip exercise, the professor hosted a "Bon Voyage" party at his house one week before departure. With jazz piano, croquet in the backyard, and the draw of food, students had a chance to socialize and to toast their journey with faculty and staff who were providing support for the trip. The party also gave students the opportunity to thank the many individuals and departments that helped subsidize their travel.

### COMMUNITY BUILDING ON THE ROAD

Once in New England, the community building intensified. Because each of the lodgings had a kitchen, students planned group meal nights. They went grocery shopping together and shared a budget, requiring direct engagement with their classmates on a practical level and resulting in collective planning about what they would prepare and how much they would need to purchase. Concerns about different palates, vegetarian options, and special dietary needs emerged, and students began looking out for one another. Students seemed to love the novelty of grocery shopping with their professor and classmates despite the strange looks they got from local grocery shoppers.

Back at the lodgings, the group separated into two teams: one for cooking and one for cleaning up afterwards. The two teams alternated jobs on different evenings and developed an unspoken cooking competition. A sense of community emerged almost immediately, and the group's stress level abated as the day's academic focus was temporarily put aside and students engaged with one another on a more human level. As an added bonus, students got a chance to rest, reread assignments, or communicate with family at home either while they waited for their dinner to be ready or while their classmates cleaned up after them. The process of shopping, cooking, dining, and cleaning up together led to some of the best times of the trip.

### PUBLICITY

The WKU Honors College gained excellent publicity from Literary New England. Both before and after the trip, the local media were alerted to the Honors College's unique endeavor. Through area newspapers, local television, university press releases, and the Literary New England blog, the trip was a discussion piece at WKU throughout the late spring. Connections were made early in the planning stages with staff members in the Office of University Relations, and multiple press releases went out at different stages of the trip's planning and execution; these were uploaded onto the university's homepage and released directly to the students' hometown newspapers. Before the trip, a video camcorder was checked out from the university, and students took turns doing a

collaborative documentation of their adventures. At the trip's conclusion, the local ABC affiliate aired a story on the local newscast that featured video taken by students and interviews with several of the students, the faculty leaders of the trip, and the Director of the Honors College.

The most labor-intensive publicity was a blog created especially for the trip. The blog ([www.wku.edu/honors/LitNE/](http://www.wku.edu/honors/LitNE/)) proved successful at communicating information about the WKU Honors College and the course in a format targeted towards an audience of millennials in an academic yet fun way. One of the participating students created the blog, and it became his culminating project in place of the required research paper. For other students, the blog served as a real-time forum both to communicate with the WKU community and to turn in assignments (including a minimum of ten journal entries posted on the blog). Students typed away furiously at laptops when internet access was available on the trip. Readers could leave comments and feedback, making it interactive even for others not on the trip. Students posted pictures and recounted experiences from their travels and then called their friends and family to take a look. During the two weeks of the trip, the university put out a press release that was uploaded to the university's homepage advertising the blog. The entire university community could follow the actions of Literary New England day by day to see new photos and blog entries.

The blog also became the final forum for the students' research papers. Once final drafts were approved and graded, students' research papers were published on the blog. Individual web pages display the photos, journal entries, and research projects for each student. For the Honors College, the blog serves as a lasting recruitment tool. Not only can the Honors College talk about the nontraditional learning formats that students experience, but they can demonstrate it through a recent, well documented example.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Although Literary New England proved to be a great success for the Honors College, there were plenty of lessons learned that may prove useful for an honors program/college wishing to plan domestic travel study. Early planning by multiple people is essential. Though planning began for this particular trip seven months in advance and involved numerous people, it still became a second job for the trip planners to bring the details together. It is also essential to include at least a second organizer in the planning and travel to help seek out site visits and places to stay, make reservations, and make payments. Travel, by its very nature, is situational, and decisions must be made on location. It is also wise, if two people plan the trip, to have a clear chain of command so that, when decisions must be made on site, everybody knows who is responsible for making them.

Scheduling is another area where trip organizers learned a great deal. One of the only student complaints came from the tight schedule. Students suggested including more free time on the next trip. Students are linked in the class by



## LITERARY NEW ENGLAND

a common interest, but that bond can only hold them together for so long. Factoring in time for student independence is a necessity to avoid burnout. Free time also builds confidence for independent travel in the future. For many of the students who grew up in rural Kentucky, seeing that they could navigate the public transportation system alone in Boston (buy a metro card, reach a determined destination, and return safely at an appointed time) built the confidence to plan further travel. Another challenge was that much of the free time that did come by happenstance occurred when the group was staying in rural locations where public transportation was not available and local nightlife was absent. In short, when the Honors College sponsors the trip again, leaders will build in more free time, especially in populated areas, for students to explore and learn on their own.

Some scheduling changes will also occur in future planning. Although Nantucket afforded experiences that could not be duplicated, that visit created complications. Staying in a research facility, having a private lecture from an astronomer, and visiting the famous Whaling Museum of the Nantucket Historical Association were valuable; however, getting to the island proved too expensive and time-consuming. Furthermore, students reported that it was one of the least enriching experiences in part because there were not enough ways to satisfy their interests, and they felt financially out of their league in the expensive shop- and restaurant-lined streets of the town's tourist center.

If grocery shopping and communal cooking are going to be part of a trip, the cost of the food should be included in the students' program fee. Splitting the cost of food at the register, as was done on the initial grocery trip, was difficult and inevitably seemed unfair to some students. Though one student may not eat meat, for instance, it may seem a necessity to others. Group shopping proved fun, but when it came to paying for the food, the initial shopping trip was more stress than it was worth. Later grocery trips were paid for by the scholarship the class received from the Student Government Association. Having the responsibility of the food's cost out of students' hands during later shopping trips prevented worries and complaints of inequalities.

Finally, with travel courses like Literary New England, where faculty and staff members are also responsible for the navigation, having a Global Positioning System (GPS) device is helpful. Though site visits were set up with what seemed ample buffer time, the group was often pushing the clock; instead of asking directions, navigating confusing rural roads, or worrying about taking the right exit on a roundabout, the leaders of the trip were able to rely on the accuracy of GPS.

## CONCLUSION

A domestic travel course like Literary New England has many of the same characteristics as a study abroad course: logistical planning, detailed cost management, and responsibility for leadership of the group. It also has many of the same advantages, including experience of other cultures, a 24-hour immersed

learning environment, and opportunities for community development. On-site instruction in the United States transcends academic disciplines and provides new pedagogical opportunities for honors programs/colleges, making it a great value.

We hope that this essay will inspire other ideas for domestic travel study and will help in their planning. Out-of-class learning experiences for honors students, whether domestic or abroad, provide on-site cultural immersion that magnifies learning and changes mindsets as the blog of one student reveals: "Today I held pieces of untouchable art in my hands. My beliefs have been shattered that every important art piece must be sitting behind some piece of glass somewhere deep in a museum." Most likely, she will never walk through a museum the same way again. This type of intellectual development was the goal of Literary New England.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

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**APPENDIX A**  
**COURSE SYLLABUS**  
**LITERARY NEW ENGLAND**  
**ENGLISH 399 HONORS**  
**MAY TERM 2007**

**Purpose:**

English 399H—Literary New England—is available only for honors-eligible students. Its purpose is to provide students with an opportunity to study some of America’s most famous New England writers—and to study them with the intensity of on-site instruction. Special features of the course include field trips to Concord, MA., Salem, Boston, Nantucket Island, Amherst, and to Hartford, CT.

**Syllabus:**

Enrolled students will be furnished with a complete syllabus by the middle of March 2007. We will meet a few times as a group before departure. Also, each of our lodgings has a commons room in which we can have lectures, discussions, and even reading quizzes. The expectation is that all works will have been read before we leave Kentucky.

**Reading Selections:**

The reading selections have been carefully chosen to reflect the sites visited:

Text: Bradford, William. Selections from “Of Plymouth Plantation.”

Site: Plymouth, MA.

Text: Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*.

Site: Walden Pond

Text: Emerson, Ralph Waldo. Selected essays.

Site: Concord, MA.

Text: Alcott, Bronson. Selected essays.

Site: Orchard House (Alcott’s home in Concord) and Fruitlands (Alcott’s experiment in communal living near Harvard, MA.)

Text: Hawthorne, Nathaniel: Selected tales and *The House of the Seven Gables*.

Site: Salem, MA, and the house of the seven gables.

Text: Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick*.

Site: Nantucket Island and also Arrowhead Farm at Pittsfield, where Melville wrote *Moby-Dick*.

Text: Dickinson, Emily. Selected poems.

Site: Amherst, MA.

CRAIG T. COBANE AND DERICK B. STRODE

Text: Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Site: Hartford, CT., home of Stowe.

Text: Twain, Mark. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*.

Site: Hartford, CT., "steamboat" home of Twain.

**Assignments:**

In addition to being prepared to discuss the readings, each student will be expected to keep a reflective travel journal. Within a month after we return, a substantial research paper needs to be submitted in which the student explores the importance of place upon a given writer's work. A topic might be as narrow as "The Influence of Arrowhead Farm upon Melville's *Moby-Dick*" or as inclusive as "The Significance of Concord upon the Transcendentalists."

## APPENDIX B

### COURSE ITINERARY

**Sunday, May 13—Travel**

Traveled, checked in to rural hostel, and bought groceries.

**Monday, May 14—Concord, MA**

Sites visited included Lexington Town Center, Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, the Old Manse, the North Bridge at Minute Man National Historic Park, Wayside, and Walden Pond.

**Tuesday, May 15—Concord, MA**

Sites visited include the Concord Town Museum, the Emerson House, and nearby Fruitlands.

**Wednesday, May 16—Gloucester, MA**

Whale-watching cruise on the Stellwagen Bank.

**Thursday, May 17—Salem, MA**

Sites visited included the House of the Seven Gables and the Salem Witch Museum.

**Friday, May 18—Plymouth, MA and travel to Nantucket Island, MA**

Sites visited were Plimoth Plantation, Plymouth Rock, and the Mayflower II. Ferried to Nantucket Island and checked-in at research center.

**Saturday, May 19—Nantucket, MA**

Free day for students to explore town and island, highlighted by an evening astronomy lecture and viewing at the Loines Observatory.

**Sunday, May 20—Nantucket, MA and travel to Boston, MA**

Sites visited were the Nantucket Whaling Museum. Traveled to Boston, MA and checked-in at urban hostel.

**Monday, May 21—Boston, MA**

Sites visited included the Boston Commons, Freedom Trail, Union Oyster House, Museum of Fine Arts, and a Historic Pub Crawl.

**Tuesday, May 22—Cambridge, MA and travel to Plainfield, MA**

Sites visited included the Harvard University campus, private tour in the Houghton Library for viewings of special holdings, and Longfellow's House. Traveled to Plainfield, MA and checked-in at rural retreat center.

**Wednesday, May 23—Pittsfield, MA**

Sites visited included Arrowhead Farm, with free time throughout the afternoon.

**Thursday, May 24—Hartford, CT**

Sites visited included the Mark Twain Home and the Harriet Beecher Stowe House.

CRAIG T. COBANE AND DERICK B. STRODE

**Friday, May 25—Amherst, MA**

Sites visited included the Emily Dickinson Homestead, the Evergreen House, and Dickinson's burial site.

**Saturday, May 26—Travel back to Kentucky**

## APPENDIX C

### LODGING OPTIONS

Friendly Crossways in Harvard, Massachusetts was Literary New England's home for the first five days of the trip. This facility would be the ideal central location to stay for the entire trip (except for the weekend to Nantucket) if the trip were to be recreated with similar site visits. Friendly Crossways can host a number of guests that would far exceed Literary New England's class size.

The Maria Mitchell Association on Nantucket Island hosts a summer intern program starting in June each year. This site, originally recommended by the Nantucket Island Chamber of Commerce, proved ideal. Literary New England's group of 14 was able to stay in the still empty dormitories that would be used by interns in the coming weeks. Available amenities included a common kitchen area, a cozy TV room, wireless internet access, and walking accessibility to the Nantucket town center.

The Boston Hostel, located by the Berklee College of Music, provided an urban and central two-night change from Literary New England's otherwise rural and quaint stays.

Nine Mountain, a retreat in Plainfield, MA, was the class's final home. This location was chosen because of its central location between Amherst and Plainfield, MA and its easy access to Hartford, CT, and Manchester, NH.