



Highly impacting honors students in Panama: HGLO at the University of Maryland College Park

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Abstract

Exploring Global Challenges and Solutions in Panama was developed to provide learners a deep global learning experience containing multiple facets of a high impact educational practice (Kuh, 2008) achieved through intentional assessment, thoughtful engagement with representatives of multiple local communities, challenging course assignments that encourage students to engage with the course location and perspectives represented, and ongoing learning for participants after the program is completed. Unique among global learning programs for Honors students in multiple ways, this program is intentionally designed to (i) engage a subset of Honors students interest to engaging in contemporary global affairs and issues in tailored experience; (ii) to take place in the Global South, allowing students to explore issues related to global accountability, interrelation, and social justice; and (iii) to use the SDGs as an interdisciplinary lens, allowing students to connect deeply with local issues in which that they have personal and professional interests.

Keywords

Honors College; Panamá; short-term education abroad; sustainable development

Exploring Global Challenges and Solutions in Panama was developed to engage Honors students in a global learning program that accomplishes multiple goals all while providing and high impact experience. The overall program goals included the ability to gain a deeper understanding of key global challenges and their current solutions through sustainable development, developing cross-cultural competencies, and the opportunity for career exploration and skills development. Developed by staff and faculty in the University of Maryland, College Park Honors College's Global Challenges and

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Solutions Living and Learning Program (HGLO), this education abroad opportunity eschewed a common model of education abroad opportunities provided to Honors students - courses offered with other international elite institutions which often reproduce barriers to learning or reified perceptions of what learning should be privileged. Instead, this program prioritizes indigenous perspectives and sustainable development approaches to solving global challenges. The course profile is presented in Table (1) below.

TABLE (1)

COURSE PROFILE

Course or Program Title and Numbers	Spring 2025: HGLO397 Exploring Global Challenges and Solutions in Panama
Course or Program Title	UMD Spring Break-Panama: Exploring Global Challenges and Solutions in Panama (HGLO)
Target Student Population(s)	Honors students in UMD's "Honors Global Challenges and Solutions" living and learning program
Content Focus, Field, or Discipline	Sustainable development; Contemporary global issues
Credit-Bearing	Yes
Program Level	Undergraduate
Program Duration	Six weeks, on campus instruction, one hour learning session per week Eight days, in person One final week, on campus instruction, one hour learning session
Onsite Locations	Panamá City, Panamá
Program Leader(s)/ Course Developer(s):	Alfredo, Oliviera; Sarah, Croco PhD; Natalie, Vinski Ibrahim PhD

The *Exploring Global Challenges and Solutions in Panama* program keeps that learning central in the development of course objectives and then pairs those objectives with integrated assessment throughout the course. Learning outcomes as outlined in the syllabus include:

- Demonstrate knowledge of fundamental concepts and ideas in a specific topical area in history or the social sciences.

- Analyse and compare the socio-economic and cultural differences between the United States and Panama, particularly in relation to food security and sustainable agriculture.
- Explain the impact of global challenges, such as climate change and food insecurity, on Panama, and make connections to similar issues in the United States.
- Demonstrate critical understanding of the relationship between social identity (gender, race, nationality, etc.) and systemic inequalities, especially in the context of Panamanian indigenous groups.
- Work collaboratively in diverse teams to engage in discussions and develop solutions related to sustainable development, based on both U.S. and Panamanian contexts.
- Apply cross-cultural communication skills in community service and interactions with local organizations, reflecting on these experiences to identify areas for collaboration.
- Explain how culture, social structure, diversity, or other key elements of historical context have an impact on individual perception, action, and values.
- Articulate how historical change shapes ideas and social and political structures.
- Effectively use skills to negotiate cross-cultural situations or conflicts in interactions inside or outside the classroom.

The provision of this learning, and how it is assessed, aligns very closely with Kuh's conceptualization of a High Impact Practice (2008). Students are repeatedly expected to demonstrate their competence to their peers and other individuals, including local Panamanian community members, but only after they have invested a significant amount of time and effort in learning about and reflecting on present day realities and challenges affecting local Panamanian communities. The students' learning is complicated by built-in experiences to confront diverse perspectives, such as site visits or collaborations with local representatives, and then they have the requirement to articulate what they learned from that confrontation. Building the assessment into the course creates a feedback loop between faculty and students that continues to engage students as they participate in other HGLO programming. Readers should refer to the syllabus for specific examples of assignments and assessments, but a good example of this collaboration is the Spotlight on Social Issues, presentations students give to their peers and receive feedback from faculty.

One assignment that has been integrated into the curriculum that challenges and supports participants' understanding of the onsite context are

four in-country group reflections which are mandatory and allow students to reflect on their learning in real time with their peers. These facilitated spaces help students process what they are learning and contrast that with expectations in real time, deepening the learning and prompting them to think in ways that are more complicated about the lived Panamanian experience.

The course has been designed to help students think more critically, and locally, from multiple perspectives. This is especially important for students interested in global development. Students are engaged in a pre-departure session on ethical engagement and service learning abroad and development that encourages them to think about their own positionality, both while on the experience, and after. While in Panama, students will engage with representatives from international development organizations like the World Food Programme, but also with members of the Emberá Indian Village, a local indigenous group. Each group is given similar amounts of time and prestige in the planning of the program.

This program is unique for Honors students, both at UMD and nationally, in multiple ways. First, many education abroad programs struggle to effectively engage a smaller subset of students within a larger population, creating effective programming that meets their interests and attracts enrollment. This program, through seeking student input and a smart curricular design, met that need, and differentiated itself among a large portfolio of short-term options for students looking to go abroad, resulting in a tailored global experience for a group of Honors students that had not been present since pre-pandemic semesters. Secondly, this program prioritizes the knowledge, work, and lived experiences, both indigenous and from other communities, taking place in the Global South, specifically in a developing Panamanian context. Many Honors programs prioritize making connections to prestigious and highly ranked institutions of knowledge, complicating access to learning. This program turns that commonplace practice around. Lastly, even with a solid curricular design and a well-intentioned focus on justice, students might not be interested in a program. This course development captured students' academic and professional interests by using the SDGs as an interdisciplinary lens and space for exploration, allowing students to develop understanding and skills in areas in which they can further explore at a later time in their educational or professional experience, making the program an attractive investment of time and resources.

References

Kuh, G.D. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Association of American Colleges and Universities.
https://navigate.utah.edu/_resources/documents/hips-kuh-2008.pdf

List of Supplemental Materials

Suppl. 1: [Course Syllabus](#)

Suppl. 2: [Signature Assignment: Research and Fact Sheet Creation](#)

Suppl. 3: [Itinerary](#)

Suppl. 4: [Panamá Country Overview Presentations](#)

Suppl. 5: [Fact Sheet Examples](#)

Author Biography

Kyle Kastler, MA, is the Associate Director of Global Learning Abroad at the University of Maryland, College Park where he helps lead the development and implementation of Education Abroad's programs. He collaborates with UMD's academic colleges and departments to provide pathways towards global opportunities for every Terp. Previously, he contributed to the field by working on in-person and virtual exchange programs funded by the U.S. Department of State. Kyle holds an M.A in International Education Policy from the University of Maryland, College Park.