Carbon Offsets for Students Studying Abroad:

Offsetting Through Volunteerism

By Tyler Swanson

**The Problem**

Study abroad programs provide students with a unique, once in a lifetime opportunity to further their education while experiencing new cultures and methods of learning; however, there is a sizeable carbon footprint associated with the undertaking of these programs as students travel from the University of Illinois to dozens of destinations across the globe. The carbon footprint generated by a student participating in a study abroad program can range from 1,000-5,000 lbs. of carbon dioxide. When this is multiplied across an entire cohort of students going on a trip, the carbon footprint of a study abroad program can be very large.

Reducing emissions from air travel is a key objective of the Illinois Climate Action Plan (iCAP), and the 2020 edition of the iCAP set a goal of reducing air travel emissions 50% from the 2014 baseline by FY24 with a further reduction of 100% by FY30. While eliminating study abroad programs is not a feasible option for reducing air travel emissions, creating a carbon offset program for students studying abroad is an achievable solution to help the University of Illinois accomplish the goals of the 2020 iCAP.

**Carbon Offsets**

Generally, carbon offsetting occurs via the person responsible for generating the carbon emissions purchasing an “offset” which certifies that the buyer’s money has contributed to a project that sequesters or avoids carbon emissions which otherwise would not have happened if the offset were not purchased. Terrapass, an online platform for purchasing individual carbon offsets, sets the price of a 2000 mile flight (the shortest distance traveled for a study abroad program) at $16.00 USD and the price of a 10000 mile flight (the longest distance traveled for a study abroad program) at $40.00 USD. While the cost of purchasing these offsets is not necessarily prohibitive to a student attending a study abroad trip, we do not believe purchasing carbon offsets is the ideal solution for the University of Illinois study abroad programs. The intent of a carbon offset initiative for study abroad programs should be to educate students about their carbon impacts while also taking action to reduce emissions, and simply adding a fee to the cost of a study abroad program does not effectively communicate the impact of the carbon emissions to the student. Our proposed solution is to create a Service-Oriented Carbon Offset Program that requires students to volunteer their time to tree planting or conservation/restoration as both a means to reduce carbon emissions and provide a valuable educational lesson on the impact of a student’s carbon emissions.

Carbon offset purchasing x Eco Ambassador training

Study Abroad Sustainability Photo Competition

Ask Study abroad office to track total miles traveled by students for study abroad programs.

**Service-Oriented Carbon Offset Program**

We have identified two main opportunities for the Study Abroad Programs office to pursue for development of a Service-Oriented Carbon Offset Program: Partner with the cities of Urbana and Champaign to plant trees throughout the region, or partner with county conservation districts to assist in prairie and wetland restoration.

*Partnering with Urbana and Champaign City Governments*

In September 2019, Urbana initiated a Cooperative Tree Planning Program to help the city’s urban forest recover after heightened tree loss resulting from emerald ash borers, a beetle that feeds on ash trees. The city aimed to plant 2-3 trees for every one lost, and asked local residents to share the cost of $125 for a new tree. Donators had the option to select a tree or let an arborist make the best selection, and were encouraged to maintain the trees throughout their early life (2-3 years). The City of Champaign has a similar program called “Share the Cost” which allows residents to pay $135 to plant a tree on the public right of way. The city coordinates with the adjacent homeowner to determine what tree to plant, and asks the homeowner to water the tree for 2-3 years during droughts.

Urbana and Champaign’s tree planting initiatives both provide students with the opportunity to make a tangible impact in the community through the planting of a tree; however, participation incurs a heavier cost than standard carbon offsets at $125-$135 per student. Additionally, the long-term sustainability of such a program must be discussed with the Urbana and Champaign city governments, as a few semesters worth of students studying abroad may meet or exceed both cities tree planting goals.