Turning Field Work and Guest Speakers into Golden Opportunities

- Poster Session at American Economic Association meetings, January 2009
- Some examples of our field trips and guest speakers are available online at http://www.coloradocollege.edu/dept/EC/index.asp. Recent editions of the electronic newsletter that we send to our alumni summarize interesting trips (also viewable on our website).

For questions or comments, or details about particular trips or itineraries or syllabi, please contact
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Abstract:
Field trips and guest speakers are often seen as a respite from 'real teaching', both by faculty and by students. Yet, if they are done right, they can provide an incomparable experience for both, driving home a subtle point or creating an environment for education impossible to duplicate in a regular classroom. It is not easy to do them well, but we believe that we have some valuable experience to share to help ease the learning curve for others.

Some tips:

- Plan to spend two days of preparation for every day in the field.
- Decide whether your trip will be topic-, issue- or organization-centric.
- Field trips do not have to be long. They can range from one hour to a week or more.
- Some share of total costs paid by the student serves to give the student ownership and responsibility for the experience.
- Tell speakers exactly what you need them to cover. Share your syllabus and full itinerary, and ask for preparation materials in return.
- Ask to meet *in situ* if possible, to get a sense of atmosphere and context.
- Consider including a lecture at another school. As a bonus, you can connect with faculty there.
- Make your expectations clear to students. Enforce an appropriate dress code.
- Let your community know you are going. Your Alumni, Admissions, and Advancement Offices will all be interested. Your Chamber of Commerce may even help to cover costs.
- Delegate students to take care of logistics. Assign students to be responsible for groceries and cooking, enforcing dress code, silencing cell phones, planning local transportation, arranging social events, confirming attendance, publicly thanking hosts, purchasing and presenting thank you gifts, collecting business cards, and taking pictures at venues.
- Prepare students for the field trip well in advance. Incorporate thematic readings, presentations, papers and assignments to ensure students have relevant knowledge before trips.
- Require prepared questions from each student relevant to speakers or venues, ensuring that every student will be able to fill any silent Q&A session.
- The debriefing experience after the trip is perhaps most important of all. Assign a paper or presentation with real stakes (e.g. an audience of city officials, faculty, and college administrators, or whoever paid for part of the trip). The debriefing experience must combine coursework with fieldwork, to avoid projects that read as a travel guide or trip narrative.

TURNING FIELD WORK & GUEST SPEAKERS INTO GOLDEN OPPORTUNITIES

AJU J. FENN, DANIEL K.N. JOHNSON, MARK GRIFFIN SMITH AND J. L. STIMPERT

Abstract: Field trips and guest speakers are often seen as a respite from 'real teaching', both by faculty and by students. Yet, if they are done right, they can provide an incomparable experience for both, driving home a subtle point or creating an environment for education impossible to duplicate in a regular classroom. It is not easy to do them well, but we believe that we have some valuable experience to share to help ease the learning curve for others.

Introduction

The purpose of a field trip or guest speaker is to enhance the educational experience in a way not possible, or less effective, than would be true in a typical classroom. There are substantial costs, both explicit and implicit, and they are not for everyone nor for every class or purpose. Nevertheless, we believe that a good field trip is worth its weight in gold.

This poster shares some tips that we have found turn our 'field trips' into 'case studies on location', where students have to identify relevant information, support position statements with facts, and synthesize an argument. exceptional, even transformative, experiences for students and faculty alike. A well-chosen (and well-prepared) guest speaker can accomplish similar effects.

There are large opportunity costs, and most arguments in favor of field trips are not about the efficiency of material delivery but rather about alternative learning styles, complementary delivery modes, and student retention.

Benefits for students:

- Identify relevant facts and synthesize coursework in a meaningful context
- Develop professional poise and communication skills
- Exercise leadership
- Make professional contacts for employment / graduate school
- Learn about professional opportunities, lifestyles

Benefits for faculty / institution:

- Make and refresh professional contacts
- Find new research projects
- Connect with alumni, donors, parents and colleagues
- Learn more about your students

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Plan to spend two days of preparation for every day in the field.

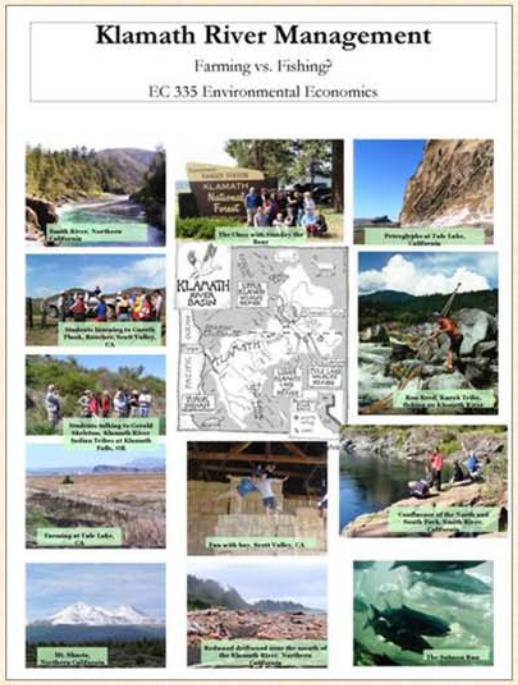
Visit somewhere or someone that you know.

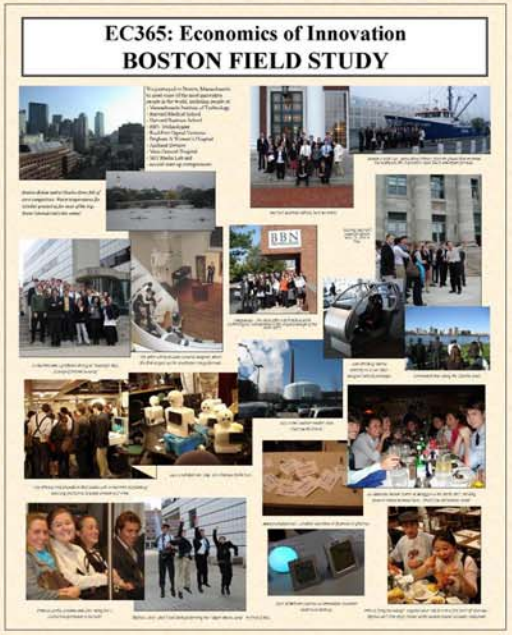
Decide whether your trip will be topic-, issue- or organization-centric.

Field trips do not have to be long. They can be one-hour trips to local events, or out-of-state trips of a week or more.

Some share of total costs paid by the student serves to give the student ownership and responsibility for the experience.

Scheduling has to be done well in advance. Double-check everything.





- Tell speakers exactly what you need them to cover. Share your syllabus and full itinerary, and ask for preparation materials in return.
- Ask to meet in situ if possible, to get a sense of atmosphere and context.
- Schedule adequate breaks, and plenty of time for transportation mishaps.
- Consider including a lecture at another school. As a bonus, you can connect with faculty colleagues there.
- Include a cultural event on longer trips. Schedule a tour near the beginning of the trip. Include a free day on longer trips, preferably at the end.
- Make your expectations clear to students. Enforce an appropriate dress code.
- Let your community know when and where you are going. Your institution's Alumni, Admissions, and Advancement Offices will all be interested. Your home Chamber of Commerce may even help to cover costs.
- Delegate students to take care of logistics. Assign students to be responsible for groceries and cooking, enforcing dress code, silencing cell phones, planning local transportation, arranging social events, confirming attendance, publicly thanking hosts, purchasing and presenting thank you gifts, collecting business cards, and taking pictures at venues.
- Prepare students for the field trip well in advance. Incorporate thematic readings, presentations, papers and assignments to ensure students have relevant knowledge before trips.
- Require prepared questions from each student relevant to speakers or venues, ensuring that every student will be able to fill any silent Q&A session.
- Of course, all participation is graded.
- The debriefing experience after the trip is perhaps most important of all. Assign a paper or presentation with real stakes (e.g. an audience of city officials, faculty, and college administrators, or whoever paid for part of the trip). The debriefing experience must combine coursework with fieldwork, to avoid projects that read as a travel guide or trip narrative.