



Dan Ritchie explains the France metro area to students, including a kneeling April Vinding, during the 2000 England Term. The students had just finished a Hemingway tour of Paris, stopping in the Luxembourg Gardens. | Photo Submitted by April Vinding

Bethel drops semester-long, faculty-led study abroad trips

Students and faculty grapple with the unexpected and permanent cancellation of Bethel's decade-old Europe term and 40-year-old England term.

By Sarah Bakeman | Design by Joy Sporleder

April Vinding stood in the Luxembourg Gardens of Paris to take in the French government buildings surrounding her. She and her classmates had just finished a Hemingway-inspired walk through the greenery and were now taking a break to listen to their trip leader, Professor Dan Ritchie, explain how to navigate the metro area. In Vinding's first days at Bethel University, studying abroad with the school's England Term of 2000 was a staple in her academic plan.

The trip would be the first time she experienced literature in 3D. Instead of reading "Pride and Prejudice" in a concrete classroom, she walked the streets of Bath. She saw the Brontë's fireplace and imagined meals cooked and a home warmed. She walked through Hemingway's memoir "A Movable Feast" in Paris.

"When you're standing in the middle of a story, it becomes immediately clear that these works considered great were made in places and times by people," she said. "That's all touchable."

Bethel Provost Robin Rylaarsdam sent an email to students and faculty Jan. 24 informing them that semester-long study abroad programs – including the English and Journalism Department's England Term and the Communication Department's Europe Term in fall 2022 – would be permanently canceled. The decision was attributed to the school's finances.

"While the importance and benefits of studying abroad remain, the disproportionate relationship between the costs of these programs and the accomplishment of learning outcomes necessitates a change," Rylaarsdam wrote.

Two decades after her trip to Europe as a student, Vinding is now Co-chair of the Department of English and Journalism. She was set to lead England Term for the first time in the fall. Leading the trip was a career landmark, she said, and she now struggles to understand the contents of the email.

"This really does seem to be a decision based on cost instead of what these programs were worth to these departments and to this institution," Vinding said. "When there are programs that help with recruitment and retention, even if we're talking business and not education worth, I have a hard time seeing how something could be more fundamentally aligned with Bethel's mission."

The news of the cancellation came after Vinding had filled pages of notes with Eu-

ropean locations and experiences, as well as the literature that would go alongside it. Co-chairs of Bethel's communication department Ripley Smith and Peggy Kendall had advertised Europe Term to prospective students, telling stories of midnight bakery runs in France and ski trips in Switzerland.

"I would've liked to see them keep this really unique program," Kendall said. "I think it's helped us stand out. We were leaders in the field of study abroad."

Reservations had been made and pre-trip retreats were planned. One of the few tasks left was buying plane tickets.

"We were going through these processes, but there was not any indication that we were doing it for no reason at all," Vinding said.

As professors' plans for England and Europe Terms are scrapped, students are left to rework course plans for the fall semester. Senior English literature and theatre arts double major Hannah Smason had extended her college plan a semester in order to go on England Term.

When Smason decided on Bethel, she said she was persuaded by two aspects: the small, tightly-knit theatre program and the possibility of studying in England for 15 weeks. Her freshman year, the theatre program was terminated, and the quick phasing out of theatre classes meant she couldn't go abroad sophomore year. Then COVID-19 caused the cancellation of her junior year trip. Then Rylaarsdam's email was sent.

"It was the second huge blow for me as a student here," Smason said. "They've cut huge parts of what I was doing and why I was here."

Smason is one of dozens of students who

now face difficult changes to their fall plans. Following the email, students and parents were invited to an informational Zoom meeting with Rylaarsdam Jan. 25. During the call, the cancellation was once again attributed to the cost of the programs, but the primary focus was alternative options for students to pursue, such as third-party study abroad and grants.

Though many participants asked questions during the call, Smason believes Rylaarsdam was unwilling to address why the price of the trip could not have been raised when parents asked. Even after the call, students and faculty felt some questions remained unanswered.

Why were students allowed to plan their college experience around this trip if there was any financial uncertainty behind the scenes?

Why were Europe Term and England Term still advertised to prospective students?

Why were trip faculty not part of this decision-making process?

Why couldn't the cost of these trips be increased?

Why not grandfather the already planned trips in for registered students before phasing them out?

Before coming to a conclusion about study abroad's future, Rylaarsdam said she sought the counsel of colleagues from financial aid, international studies, the business office and academic affairs. Faculty trip leaders played no part in this decision.

"It was and is still clear that there's no action on the part of faculty that could fix the finances," Rylaarsdam said. "It is simply very expensive to live and study in Europe or the UK for 15 weeks."

Vinding believes that faculty could have economically altered the trip in a way that would satisfy Rylaarsdam, especially if they had been involved in the decision-making process. Following the decision to cancel semester-long study abroad programs led by Bethel faculty members, Ritchie sent an email to Rylaarsdam which included a list of potential changes that could have been made. Some of the options included raising the price of the trip, charging separately for expenses such as plane tickets, staying in study centers instead of large cities, shortening the trip by 5-7 days and appealing to donors for dedicated study abroad funds.

During the past decade, the financial impact of study abroad has been reviewed multiple times. When Rylaarsdam met with

Associate Provost Julie Finner in the fall, the budget for the 2023 fiscal year seemed promising enough to ensure the continuation of semester-long study abroad programs. However, January is a benchmark for predicting enrollment for the coming academic year, and one thing became clear: spending would need to be reduced significantly.

"When the decision was made, we set up a meeting with the faculty so that we could communicate the decision as soon as possible," Rylaarsdam said. "Students and families affected were communicated shortly after the announcement to faculty."

After spending a few days hiking through nature and lamenting over the news, Vinding and department co-chair Susan Brooks began the process of undoing their plans. Brooks spent more than \$13,000 on cancellation fees. In addition to monetary cost, Vinding and Kendall's time has been absorbed in not only reworking the fall semester, but also the future of the departments.

"I don't know if it'll impact our numbers," Kendall said. "We have to figure out a different way to recruit, and I think the same is true for the English department."

The impact of this decision on Bethel's recruitment in the coming years cannot be measured. However, in order to gain greater insight, Ritchie reached out to the 22 students from his 2009 England Term trip. He asked how knowledge of the trip impacted their college decision, and nine of the 22 said the program was "highly significant" in their decision to attend Bethel. Although he admits his analysis is not perfect, Ritchie believes the potential loss of tuition from prospective students interested in study abroad could be greater than the cost of the program.

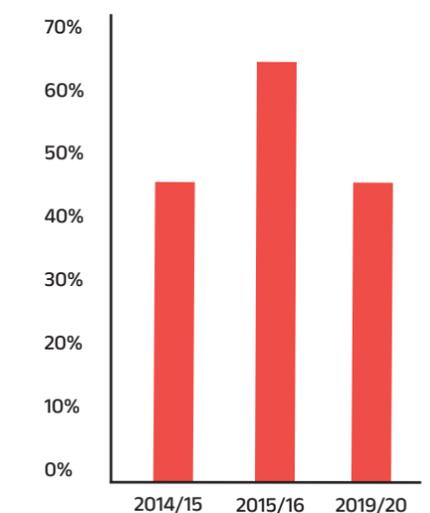
"To me, this makes a powerful argument that the programs are too valuable to cut," Ritchie said.

Study abroad was heavily integrated into many English and communication students' time at Bethel. Kendall recalls the deep bonds students made on the trips – how they would come to talk and visit with her even after the 15 weeks were up. Upon students' return to campus, Vinding graded dozens of writing assignments in which students would recount their experiences from England Term.

"It is irreplaceable in terms of having an immersive, on-location experience," Vinding said. "But we are going to do everything we can to give students an echo of that experience."

The English department is rushing to offer a travel writing class for next interim to Thailand or Belize, as well as on-location learning for locally-focused literature. In addition to this, both the English and communication

% of students that study abroad at Bethel by year



Retention rates

Retention rate is nearly 100% for study abroad students and regular student body retention is 86.3%

departments have students now searching for third-party study abroad opportunities. While these alternatives satisfy many students' desire to travel, Kendall says they lack a spiritual component.

"I'm not sure there is a great alternative for students who want to study abroad for a semester in a way you can explore your faith as you are also learning content," Kendall said. "We're not going to get that with third-party programs."

As English and communication studies students figure out how they will spend their fall semester, Vinding has come to a clear conclusion: She will never guide Bethel students through the cobbled streets of Paris or the passages of Hemingway's novels, and her students won't imagine the warmth of the Brontë's fire or the life of Elizabeth Bennet in the same way that she did two decades ago.

"I've been looking forward to this trip for my entire career," Vinding said. "And that's one of the smallest losses." **C**