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Dear Dr. Peters,

Study abroad is an important part of what makes Iowa State University a home for many students. It provides students with life-changing opportunities, academic and personal enrichment, and enhanced cultural understanding. As students in ENGL 3140, we have developed the following recommendation report focused on improving the website of Iowa State's Study Abroad Center.

The information presented in this report, based on thorough research, includes our methods, results, recommendations, and final closing statements. The report begins by introducing the purpose and scope and moves into the methods section. After discussing our methods, which includes information on how we developed our usability test, the results are analyzed. From these results, three recommendations are proposed: Adding a "Study Abroad Center Staff" link to the Quick Links box, developing a strict template for *ISUAbroad* pages, and adding smaller drop-down menus to the Pack your bags page. In the conclusion, we reiterate the importance and ease with which our recommendations could be implemented. Finally, we provide a references and appendix section to supplement the content we are presenting.

We appreciate you taking the time to review our recommendation report. We hope that our contributions can enhance student experience with the Study Abroad Center's website. If you have any questions or would like to discuss further research regarding this topic, please contact us.

Sincerely,

Zoe Bratton and Madison Lewis

Recommendation Report on the Study Abroad Center's Website at Iowa State University

Zoe Bratton, Madison Lewis

Iowa State University

May 5th, 2025

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Introduction

At Iowa State, the opportunity to study abroad is one in which many students participate. Studying abroad, defined as a time “when a student pursues their academic goals in a foreign country” (*What is Study Abroad? Everything You Need to Know!*, 2024), is a unique, often once-in-a-lifetime, experience for students. While studying abroad can vary in location, cost, and length of stay, one thing necessary for every experience is a centrally located resource where students can find the information they need. At Iowa State, the Study Abroad Center’s website acts as a useful guide for students looking to combine their academic goals with their desire to travel the world.

The purpose of this report, as discussed in more detail throughout the next section, is to highlight navigation and formatting issues present throughout the Study Abroad Center’s website. Although students can access this website with little issue, there are improvements that could be made, resulting in a more organized and intuitive website. This report is aimed at Iowa State students, parents, and Study Abroad Center staff, as these individuals most frequently interact with the website.

Purpose

The rhetorical purpose of this report is to recommend realistic, cost-effective changes that could be made to the Study Abroad Center’s website to enhance user experience. Although the website is currently designed to align with other Iowa State University websites, there are three main problem areas that could be addressed to make the website more accessible. First, the organization of the website’s homepage is not intuitive. It requires a large amount of scrolling, and contact information, which is typically found at the bottom of a webpage, is in the center of the homepage. This likely causes users to miss it. Next, the Resources tab, located in the homepage’s top navigation bar, includes pages with information that can be difficult to find. Lastly, narrowing down one’s program of interest is difficult, as the user is redirected outside of the Study Abroad Center’s original website.

To examine these issues, three user personas were created, located in the appendix of this report (see page 14). These user personas, highlighting the needs of a university student, parent, and faculty member, acted as a guide for the development of a usability test. With the help of this test, five anonymous users provided feedback on the Study Abroad Center’s website while completing a series of tasks designed to target the problem areas discussed above.

Scope

The scope of the information considered in the research process includes a focus on a few main areas of the website. First, the team analyzed the organization of the website’s homepage and Resources tab. Next, the team focused on navigating to Africa, Middle East, and European programs. Other aspects of the website were not considered throughout the research process.

Finally, the team conducted the usability test over the course of a week, interviewing only Iowa State students and one Iowa State parent.

Methods

For this report, a usability test on the Study Abroad Center's website was conducted. Before conducting this test, three user personas were developed to guide the team in choosing representative and informed participants. The user personas represented typical users of the Study Abroad Center's website, including a student, parent of a student, and a faculty member (see Figure 6, 7, 8). These personas can be accessed in the appendix (see page 14). After developing the user personas, participants from ENGL 3140 and outside of the classroom were recruited to participate in the testing.

Five participants completed the usability test, each of whom was asked three open-ended questions and given four guided tasks to complete. These tasks were designed to simulate the types of information a user would likely search for when planning to study abroad. Also, the tasks focused on the problem areas discussed above. Participants used their personal computers and were asked to talk aloud as they navigated through the tasks. Before starting the tasks, users were asked to describe their first impressions of the Study Abroad Center's website. Then, users were timed as they completed each task. Users started tasks by navigating from the homepage of the website. The specific tasks are outlined below:

1. Find the advisor a user should contact if they are interested in studying abroad in Greece.
2. Locate the dates and deadlines to apply to a study abroad program in Copenhagen, Denmark for the Fall 2025 semester.
3. Navigate to the Pack your bags resource page. Locate the Nice to have, but not essential section of this page.
4. Locate the cost of the Spring 2025 program in Meknes, Morocco.

After completing the tasks, users were asked two final questions regarding their experience with the website:

1. What changes would you suggest be made to the Study Abroad Center's website?
2. Describe an audience or type of user you think would find this website most appealing to use. Tell me why you think of that audience or type of user.

These tasks and questions were designed to reflect the users' needs when navigating through the Study Abroad Center's website. The usability test was conducted with as much consistency as possible to gather accurate and meaningful insights into the website's overall user experience.

There were a few limitations throughout this process. First, only five participants were tested. This is not a representative sample size. Next, the testing occurred over about one week, which is

a limited time frame. Unfortunately, the team was unable to test a university faculty member, which would have allowed for the development of a more comprehensive report. Finally, there wasn't an opportunity to fix the issues with the website and compare how user experience improved with these fixes.

Results

The following outlines the results of the usability test performed on the Study Abroad Center's website. The subsequent results highlight the tasks the users were asked to complete, their time to complete the tasks, thoughts and feedback from the participants and additional observations from the evaluators. Table 1 details the timed results from the tasks.

User Number	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3	Task 4
1*	32:59	1:04:46	27:23	29:20
2	FAIL	1:56:00	21:11	1:15:77
3*	1:21:17	26:75	20:53	46:41
4	1:03:05	27:86	16:43	24:23
5	FAIL	25:96	43:63	30:42
AVERAGE	58:94	52:21	25:79	41:21

Table 1: Timed results from the four tasks. If the User has an asterisk () next to their number, they have previously used or visited the Study Abroad Center's website. If they were considered a failure, this means the participant was unable to find the information required by the task.*

Task 1: Find the advisor a user should contact if they are interested in studying abroad in Greece.

Only three out of the five users successfully found the advisor to contact for studying abroad in Greece. Both User 2 and User 5 ended up finding the Contact Us page, however, they could not find the specific advisor to contact if one is interested in studying abroad in Greece. The average time to complete this task was 58:94 seconds. Three out of the five users navigated to the Europe Programs to find the information, while the two other participants navigated to the Contact Us page. Participants took the longest amount of time to complete this task. The main point of confusion for those who navigated to the Europe Programs appeared to be uncertainty in which program to click on to find the advisor.

Task 2: Locate the dates and deadlines to apply to a study abroad program in Copenhagen, Denmark for the Fall 2025 semester.

All users successfully found the dates and deadlines to apply to a study abroad program in Copenhagen, Denmark. It took users an average of 52:21 seconds to locate the dates and deadlines. Most participants were able to directly navigate to this task with few issues, however, User 1 and User 2 struggled to navigate to this task. User 1 navigated to the Quick Links box and then to Programs but was not satisfied because they could not locate the results they were searching for. User 1 then proceeded to the Europe Programs link in the top navigation bar and

found the correct route. User 2 navigated to the correct page for Copenhagen, Denmark, although they went to Apply Now and ended up having to back track.

Task 3: Navigate to the Pack your bags resource page. Locate the Nice to have, but not essential section of this page.

All users were successfully able to find the Nice to have, but not essential section of this page. It took users an average of 25:79 seconds to locate this information, making it the fastest task. Most participants had little issue navigating to this task, although several were confused at first as they did not click on the drop-down menu. One participant did note that it was difficult to see this section of the page.

Task 4: Locate the cost of the Spring 2025 program in Meknes, Morocco.

All users successfully found the cost of the Spring 2025 Meknes, Morocco program. It took them an average of 41:21 seconds to locate this page. There were few issues navigating through this task. Most of the confusion among participants stemmed from them not knowing which continent Morocco is in.

Open-Ended Questions

The results from the open-ended questions are listed below. All participants were asked the following questions in addition to completing the tasks. Question number one was asked prior to beginning the tasks, while questions two and three were asked after completing the tasks.

Question 1: Describe your first impressions of the Study Abroad Center's website. You can discuss what you see, hear, or anything else you experience.

The users' first impressions of the Study Abroad Center's website were mostly positive. They liked the design of the homepage, specifically the navigation bar on top that broke down the different regions of the website. One participant also noted they appreciated the familiar formatting, similar to most Iowa State websites. Another participant did note that the drop-down menu under the Africa & Middle East Program lacked the ability to view specific countries, unlike the rest of the programs.

Question 2: After navigating through each task, what changes would you suggest be made to the Study Abroad Center's website?

After navigating through each task, several participants were frustrated that the site redirected them to an external website when searching for specific programs. Additionally, several participants noted that the headers on the *ISUAbroad* website could be easier to access. Other participants also noted that Task 1, which asked them to find the Greece advisor's contact information, was somewhat difficult to complete. Furthermore, they noted it was a little

confusing to navigate to the Contact Us page, so making this information more accessible would be helpful to users.

Question 3: Describe an audience or type of user you think would find this website most appealing to use. Tell me why you think of that audience or type of user.

Most participants believed that the main audience of the Study Abroad Center's website would likely be students. Two participants noted that it could also be used by the parents of a student interested in studying abroad. The website would be helpful to keep parents up to date on information about their child's program.

The questions were selected to emulate the important information a student might seek if they are wanting to study abroad or do research in the program. The tasks were chosen based on the idea that they reflect the kind of information a student would search for during their decision-making process. Overall, most tasks were completed successfully by users, although some information was challenging for them to locate.

Recommendations

After completing the usability test and analyzing the feedback received, three recommendations have been developed. These recommendations are aimed at refining aspects of the Study Abroad Center's website, making it a more enjoyable experience for all users.

1: Add "Study Abroad Center Staff" Link to Quick Links Box.

The most difficult task for users to complete was Task 1, taking participants an average of 58:94 seconds. To reduce confusion in finding contact information for a specific advisor, Team 6 recommends that a "Study Abroad Center Staff" link is added to the Quick Links box (See Figure 1). This link would include information about study abroad advisors, and how to contact them. By focusing this information in one area, users will have an easier time accessing it. Also, as this information already exists within the website, this small change would not require significant time or expense. Ultimately, doing this could improve accessibility and may result in an increase in students reaching out to the Study Abroad Center.

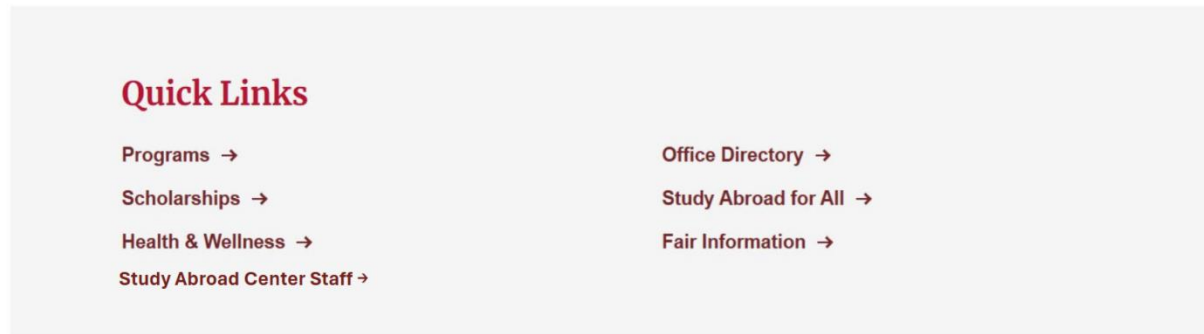


Figure 1: Revised Quick Links. Adding a “Study Abroad Center Staff” link to this box would make it easier for users to figure out who to contact with questions regarding a specific study abroad program. (Study Abroad Center).

2: Develop a strict template for ISUAbroad pages.

After Task 1, the second and fourth tasks were the most difficult for users. This is because when locating information regarding a study abroad program’s dates, deadlines, and costs, users are redirected outside of the Study Abroad Center’s original website. Users are directed to *ISUAbroad*, but the *ISUAbroad* pages can be overwhelming to navigate (See *Figures 2 & 3*). The team’s recommendation is to develop a template in which all *ISUAbroad* pages strictly follow. This template would limit the amount of information on each page, increase the size of the top navigation bar, and make the headings easier to see. Also, this template would regulate the size and number of images used on each page to promote cleanliness and uniformity.

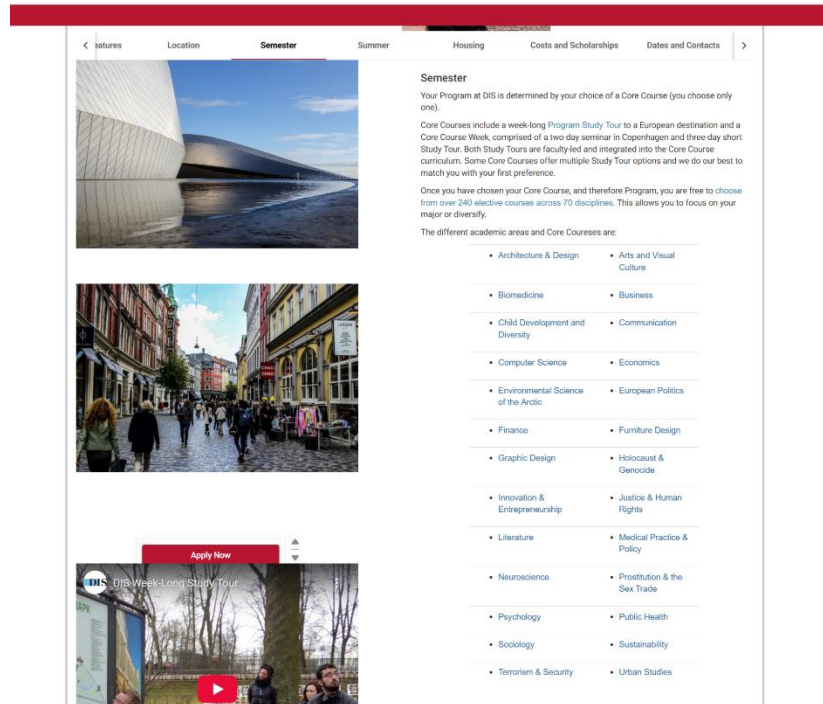


Figure 2: Copenhagen, Denmark ISUAbroad Semester page. When contrasted with the same page from the Meknes, Morocco program below, the lack of uniformity is overwhelming to users. (Study Abroad Center).

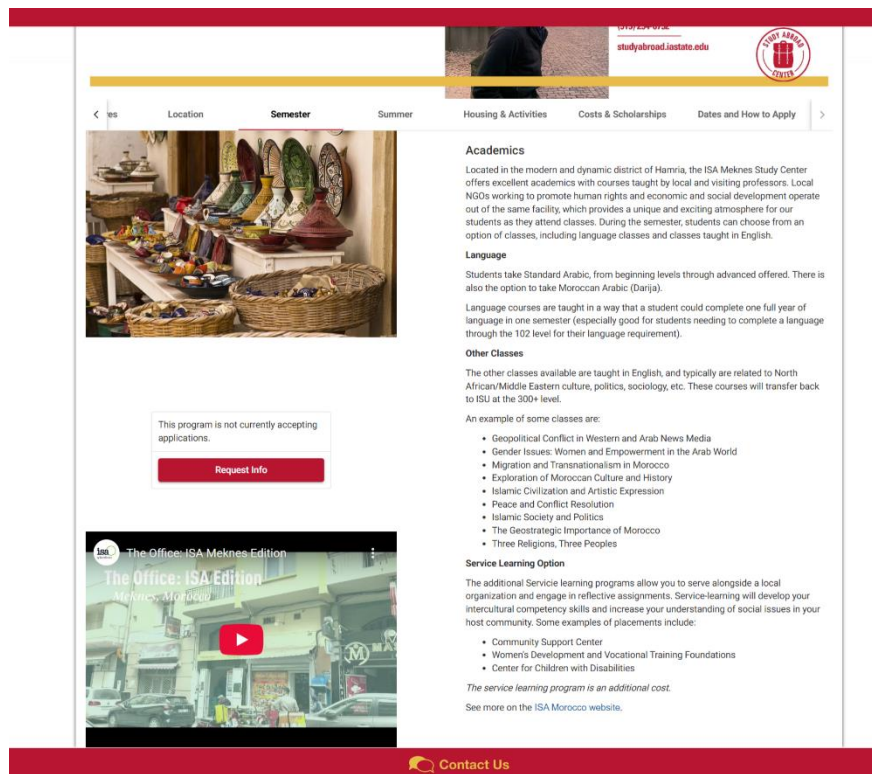


Figure 3: Meknes, Morocco ISUAbroad Semester page (Study Abroad Center).

3: Add Drop-Down Menus to the Pack Your Bags Page.

Although participants completed Task 3 in less than 30 seconds, multiple participants were confused by the drop-down menus hiding the Packing list and Other packing tips (See *Figure 4*). Team 6 recommends that these drop-down menus are replaced with smaller, more specific drop-down menus. For example, instead of listing everything under one large drop-down menu, so that users are forced to scroll multiple times, breaking the information into smaller headings could be helpful. Headings such as “Clothes,” “Electronics,” and “Documents” (See *Figure 5*) would make it easier for users to locate specific information regarding items to pack.

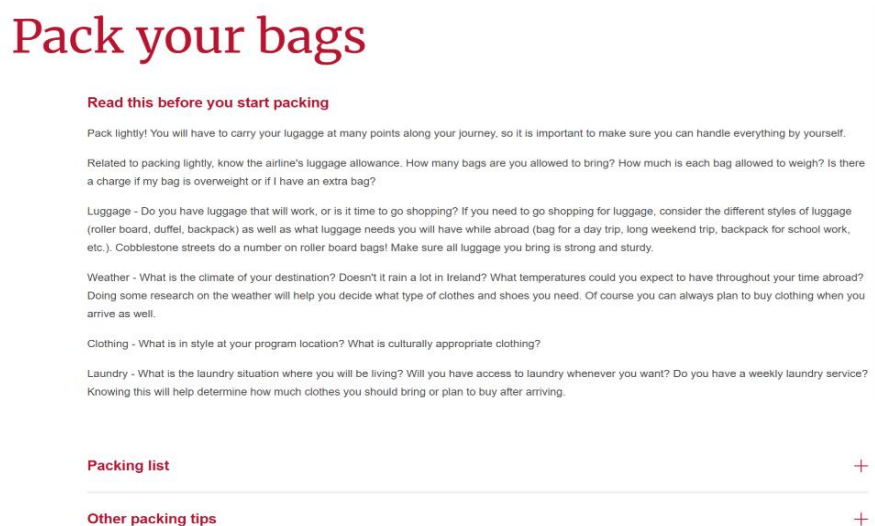


Figure 4: Packing list and Other packing tips drop-down menus. (Study Abroad Center).

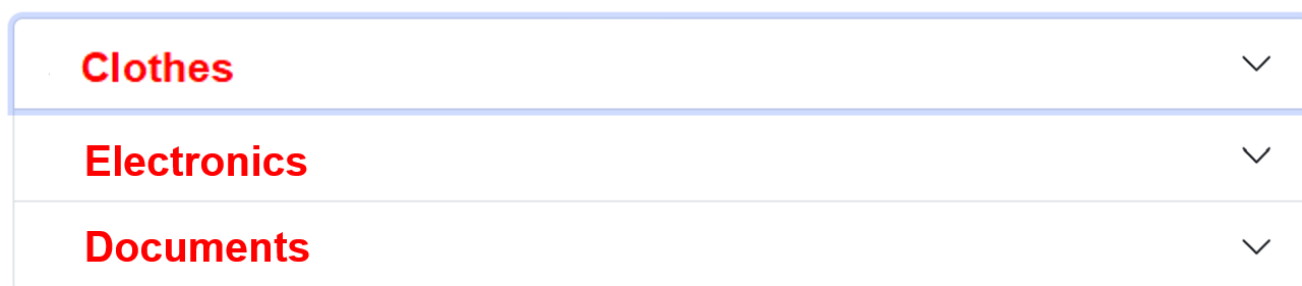


Figure 5: Smaller drop-down menus (Mark Otto, J. T.).

Closing

The Study Abroad Center’s website is a helpful tool for students planning to travel abroad throughout their time in college. While useful, after feedback from individuals participating in a usability test, there are a few adjustments that could be made: reorganization of the website’s

homepage, a stricter template for *ISUAbroad* pages, and the addition of drop-down menus on the Pack your bags tab. Ultimately, implementing these recommendations would be incredibly beneficial as they will improve user experience, increase accessibility, and elevate site engagement, prompting more students to engage in this invaluable experience.

References

Mark Otto, J. T. (n.d.). *Accordion*. Bootstrap v5.3.

<https://getbootstrap.com/docs/5.3/components/accordion/>

Study Abroad Center. (2025). Iastate.edu. <https://www.studyabroad.iastate.edu/>

What is Study Abroad? Everything You Need to Know!. CIEE. (2024, March 7).

<https://www.ciee.org/go-abroad/college-study-abroad/blog/what-study-abroad-everything-you-need-know>

Appendix

User Personas

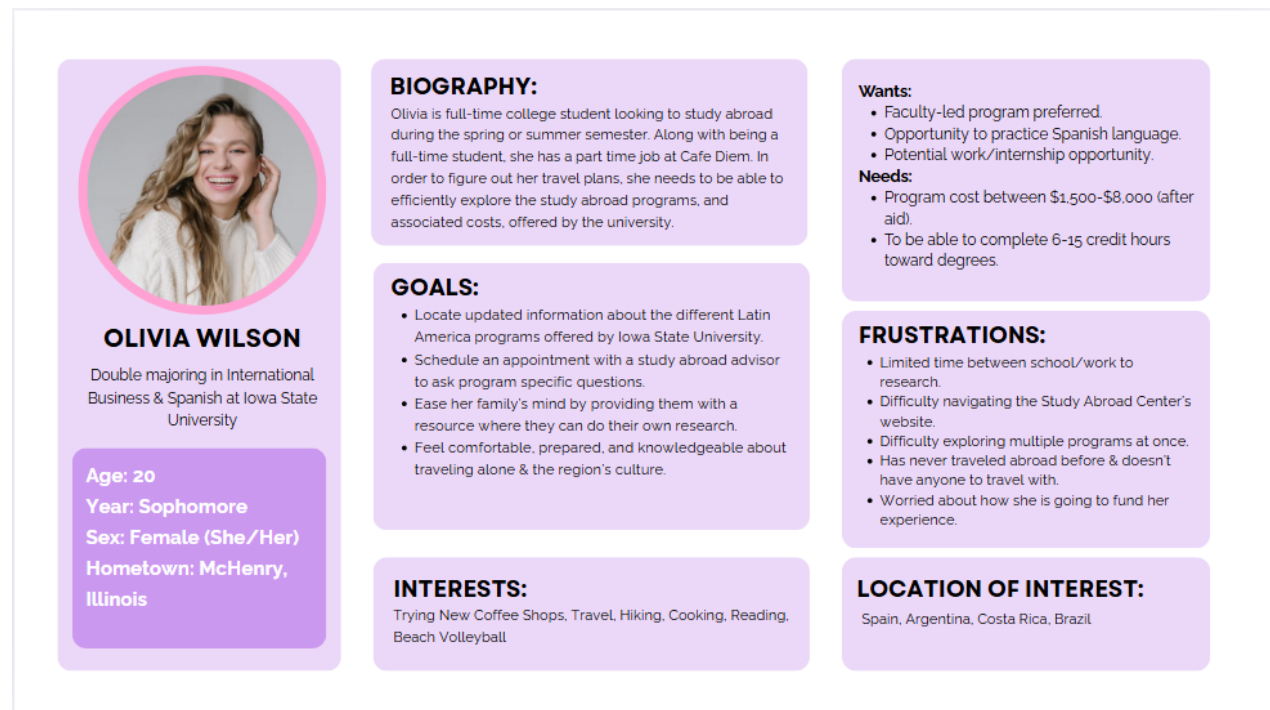


Figure 6: User persona for a student attending Iowa State.



Figure 7: User persona for a parent of a student attending Iowa State.

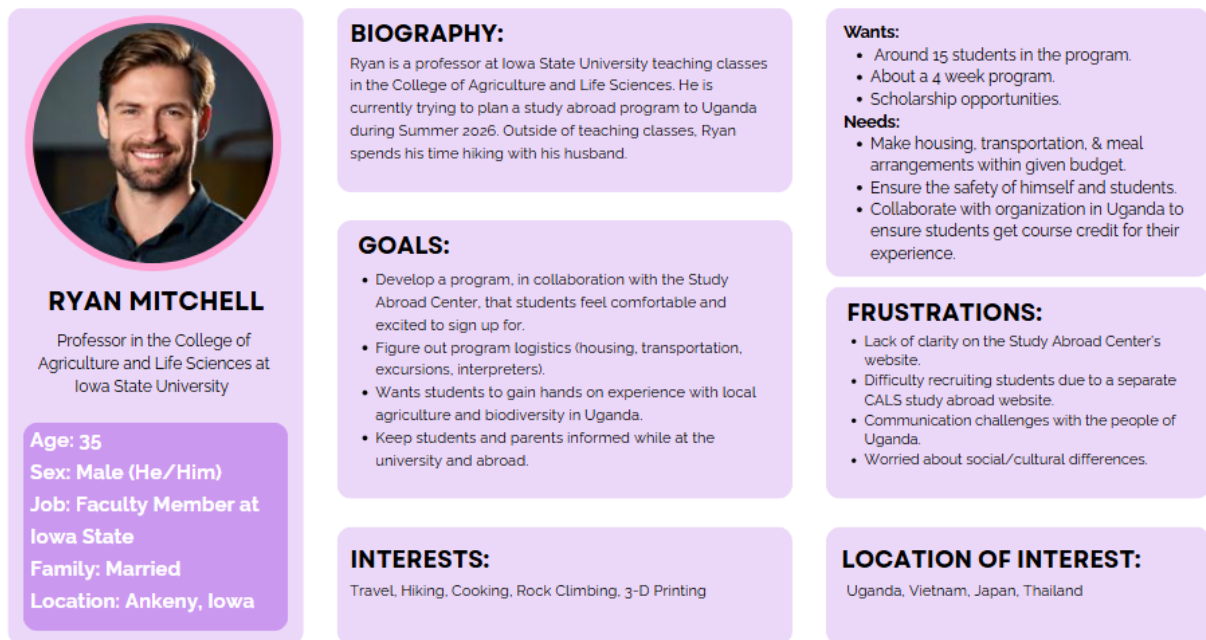


Figure 8: User persona for a professor at Iowa State.

Usability Test Notes

Participant Number 1	
Name:	
Date: 4/15/2024	
Have they used/visited the study abroad website previously?	Yes (Participant was considering studying abroad during Summer 2024).

Open Ended Questions:

Describe your first impressions of the Study Abroad Center's website. You can discuss what you see, hear, or anything else you experience.

- "I like the navigation bar at the top of the screen. I like the banner image in the middle of the screen, and I like the Quick Links area."
- "I don't like that I can't fully see the Study Abroad Center box when I'm at the top of the main page."

- “I believe the information in the middle of the page may be a bit too much. I just scrolled passed it and didn’t even read it.”

Tasks

1. **Find the individual one should contact if they are interested in studying abroad in Greece.**

- **Time:** 32.59 seconds
- **Notes:** Begins at Office Directory. Then, study abroad center staff. Lastly, scrolled to Nicole Humphrey. Seemed easy enough.

2. **Locate the dates and deadlines to apply to a study abroad program in Copenhagen, Denmark for the Fall 2025 semester.**

- **Time:** 1:04.46 seconds
- **Notes:** Begins at Quick Links. Clicks on Programs. (She wasn’t satisfied with this route). Moved up to Europe programs (Navigation Bar). Clicks on Denmark. Clicks on Copenhagen, Denmark program. Clicks on “Dates and Contacts.” Scrolled to the bottom of the page.
- Confused about the external redirection at first. Almost decided to go back to original website.

3. **Navigate to the “Pack your bags” resource page. Locate the “Nice to have, but not essential” section of this page.**

- **Time:** 27.23 seconds
- **Notes:** Clicks on Resources in Navigation bar. Clicks on pack your bags. Scrolls down to packing list. Clicks on drop down menu. Continues to scroll until “Nice to have, but not essential” comes up.
- Participant seemed confused when trying to locate the “Nice to have, but not essential” section. Almost didn’t click on drop down bar.

4. **Locate the cost of the Spring 2025 program in Meknes, Morocco.**

- **Time:** 29.20 seconds
- **Notes:** Begins with Africa and Middle East Programs. Clicks on Meknes, Morocco program. Clicks on “Costs and Scholarships.” Scrolled down to find it

Open Ended Questions Continued:

After navigating through each task, what changes would you suggest be made to the Study Abroad Center’s website? (If any?)

“I didn’t like that it brought me to an external website. I didn’t know it would bring me there and it was a bit confusing.”

“Too many navigation bars. I would try and make everything internal on the Study Abroad Center’s website. I would put as much information about dates and costs as possible on the actual website.”

Describe an audience or type of user you think would find this website most appealing to use. Tell me why you think of that audience or type of user.

“Mainly Iowa State students would use it as they’re likely the ones interested in study abroad.”

“Parents would also be on this website as they are going to want to learn where their child is studying abroad and more information about it. But I can tell you right now my mom would get confused using this website.”

Participant Number 2	
Name:	
Date: 4/21/2025	
Have they used/visited the study abroad website previously?	No.

Open Ended Questions

Describe your first impressions of the Study Abroad Center's website. You can discuss what you see, hear, or anything else you experience.

- “First, I am wondering where this banner picture is from.”
- “I am interested to see what the student on the main page has to say.”
- “I like how the website breaks down the programs in the top navigation bar using different regions.”
- “The Quick Links area is nice. Most of the time you already have something in mind when you are coming to a website like this, so Quick Links is a fast and easy tool to use.”

Tasks

1. **Find the individual one should contact if they are interested in studying abroad in Greece.**
 - **Time:** 1:31.33
 - **Notes:** Clicked on Europe Programs. Clicked on Greece. Looking at different program options. Stumbling across note saying “Contact Us Now.” Went back and clicked on Faculty-led programs in Europe. Clicked on “For Love of Food, Greece, and Italy.” Found contacts for that specific program.
 - **Did not get to the contact we had in mind.**
2. **Locate the dates and deadlines to apply to a study abroad program in Copenhagen, Denmark for the Fall 2025 semester.**
 - **Time:** 1:56.00
 - **Notes:** Clicked on Europe programs. Clicked on Denmark, Norway, Sweden. Clicked on Copenhagen, Denmark program. Clicked on “Apply Now.” It didn’t work, so had to go back. Clicked on “Dates and Deadlines.” Finally got to the correct place. Noted that it was a bit hidden/difficult to see.

3. **Navigate to the “Pack your bags” resource page. Locate the “Nice to have, but not essential” section of this page.**

- **Time:** 21.11 seconds
- **Notes:** Looked under Resources tab. Clicked on Packing List. Scrolled down to find “Nice to have, but not essential.”
- Fastest task for this user

4. **Locate the cost of the Spring 2025 program in Meknes, Morocco.**

- **Time:** 1:15.77 seconds
- **Notes:** Typed in the word Morocco in the search bar at the top. Went to Africa and Middle East Study Abroad in top navigation bar. Clicked on Meknes program. Clicked on “Costs and Scholarships” and scrolled down.

Open Ended Questions

After navigating through each task, what changes would you suggest be made to the Study Abroad Center’s website? (If any?)

- “I would appreciate more Quick Links.”
- “I would appreciate the search bar taking a user exactly where they need to go.”
- “It would be nice if the website were reformatted to make the top navigation in the *ISUAbroad* area easier to see/access.”
- “The website would definitely be frustrating to use if you only had a little bit of time to find something.”

Describe an audience or type of user you think would find this website most appealing to use. Tell me why you think of that audience or type of user.

- “I think students searching out different opportunities would be using this website.”

- “I think parents would also be using this website to understand the different programs offered at Iowa State and what the costs are going to be.”

Participant Number 3	
Name:	
Date:	4/18/25
Have they used/visited the study abroad website previously?	Yes but it has been years.

Open Ended Questions

Describe your first impressions of the Study Abroad Center’s website. You can discuss what you see, hear, or anything else you experience.

Formatted like most ISU websites, typeface, header, same dropdowns. By region, academic personal developments quotes and quick links. Click on country and get a list of universities.

Tasks

- Find the individual one should contact if they are interested in studying abroad in Greece.

Time: 1:21:17

Notes: Started by click on Greece and linked to a different website. Click request info. Dates and how to apply. Clicked on person for the study abroad Athens. .

- Locate the dates and deadlines to apply to a study abroad program in Copenhagen, Denmark for the Fall 2025 semester.

Time: 26:75

Notes: Navigated right to it and had little issues.

- Navigate to the “Pack your bags” resource page. Locate the “Nice to have, but not essential” section of this page.

Time: 20:53

Notes: Went to pack your bags had to click down to the bottom and open the header in order to find it.

- Locate the cost of the Spring 2025 program in Meknes, Morocco.

Time: 46.41s

Notes: Navigated to Morocco fairly easily

Open Ended Questions

After navigating through each task, what changes would you suggest be made to the Study Abroad Center's website? (If any?)

Honestly it is not too bad. Found it fairly to find the programs and broken down into countries even more. Good headers on the location of the countries. Even liked the map search feature. Finding the contact would be fairly hard for the country and would find it for the program.

Describe an audience or type of user you think would find this website most appealing to use. Tell me why you think of that audience or type of user.

Students because don't know who else is going to be using it. Maybe have people who are set on going study abroad and people who are considering study abroad. Both groups are pretty well served and resources while you are abroad already and information on potential options.

Participant Number 4	
Name:	
Date:	4/21/25
Have they used/visited the study abroad website previously?	No

Open Ended Questions

Describe your first impressions of the Study Abroad Center's website. You can discuss what you see, hear, or anything else you experience.

Looks pretty nice on first glance. Africa/Middle East programs don't have drop down arrow.

Tasks

- Find the individual one should contact if they are interested in studying abroad in Greece.

Time: 1:03:05

Notes: Europe programs, greece, scrolled down. Went under resources. Study abroad center staff. To find Nicole Humphrey.

- Locate the dates and deadlines to apply to a study abroad program in Copenhagen, Denmark for the Fall 2025 semester.

Time: 27.86 s

Notes: Went to Europe Denmark. Then went to dates and deadlines

- Navigate to the “Pack your bags” resource page. Locate the “Nice to have, but not essential” section of this page.

Time: 16.43 s

Notes: Went to pack your bags. Packing List. Went to nice to have but not essential.

- Locate the cost of the Spring 2025 program in Meknes, Morocco.

Time: 24.23s

Notes: Went to Africa. And clicked costs to find costs.

Open Ended Questions

After navigating through each task, what changes would you suggest be made to the Study Abroad Center’s website? (If any?)

Make it more clear about contacts because it wasn’t intuitive to find the person to contact for Greece.

Describe an audience or type of user you think would find this app most appealing to use. Tell me why you think of that audience or type of user.

Most appealed to someone studying abroad. If they wanted to study abroad they could definitely find it.

Participant Number 5	
Name:	
Date: 4/21/2024	
Have they used/visited the study abroad website previously?	I have not.

Open Ended Questions

Describe your first impressions of the Study Abroad Center’s website. You can discuss what you see, hear, or anything else you experience.

- “It’s not too overwhelming. I think it gives a good general sense of where to go next when on the page. Also, the website is not bad at directing the user to find general tasks.”

Tasks

1. **Find the individual one should contact if they are interested in studying abroad in Greece.**

- **Time:** 48.90 seconds
- **Notes:** Clicked on Europe programs in top navigation bar. Clicked on a specific program. Clicked on “Contact Us” on *ISUAbroad*.
- **Never ended up finding the correct page. Only found the “Contact Us” area.**

2. **Locate the dates and deadlines to apply to a study abroad program in Copenhagen, Denmark for the Fall 2025 semester.**

- **Time:** 25.96 seconds
- **Notes:** Clicked on Europe programs. Clicked on Copenhagen program and was taken to *ISUAbroad*. Scrolled down to “Dates and Deadlines” and found the required information.

3. **Navigate to the “Pack your bags” resource page. Locate the “Nice to have, but not essential” section of this page.**

- **Time:** 43.63 seconds
- **Notes:** Clicked on Resources page. Scrolling. Clicked on the Resources page a second time and then scrolled to find the drop-down menu. Ultimately ended up finding it.
- **My observation:** Drop down button seemed to be a bit hidden for the user.

4. **Locate the cost of the Spring 2025 program in Meknes, Morocco.**

- **Time:** 30.42 seconds
- **Notes:** Clicked on Africa/Middle East Program. Clicked on Meknes, Morocco program. Clicked on the “Costs and Scholarships” tab. Scrolled down to find information.

Open Ended Questions

After navigating through each task, what changes would you suggest be made to the Study Abroad Center’s website? (If any?)

- “I felt as though the ‘Nice to have, but not essential’ list felt hidden. Maybe bolding the title would make it easier to find.”
- “I think there could be more information about who/where to contact for any questions students or parents have.”

Describe an audience or type of user you think would find this website most appealing to use. Tell me why you think of that audience or type of user.

- “I think college students because they are the ones using this resource to study abroad.”
- “I also think it’s a good resource for parents looking at program breakdowns, especially things like costs.”
- “I thought the pictures were appealing and the content organization was appealing as well.”