Kansas City Kansas Community College Study Abroad: Cusco, Peru 2025

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Abstract

Kansas City Kansas Community College's 2025 study abroad program in Cusco, Peru, provided participants with transformative cultural and service-learning experiences. Led by Dr. Candice M. Scott and Dr. Todd Miles in partnership with Projects Abroad, the program integrated classroom engagement, community service, and cultural exploration. Students volunteered in preschool classrooms, renovated a school playground, and visited historic sites, including Machu Picchu and the Sacred Valley of Peru. Through these activities, participants gained global competencies in cultural awareness, adaptability, and leadership. The program fostered personal growth, had a meaningful community impact, and laid the foundation for future international learning opportunities at KCKCC.

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Study abroad experiences have been recognized as powerful tools for promoting cultural awareness, global citizenship, and personal development in higher education. Theresa Schenker's (2019) study on short-term study abroad programs demonstrated that participation can positively influence global competencies, "such as open-mindedness, attentiveness to diversity, and historical perspective" (p. 147).

In July 2025, Kansas City Kansas Community College (KCKCC) launched its inaugural study abroad program in Cusco, Peru, in partnership with Projects Abroad. Led by Dr. Candice M. Scott, Assistant Director of International and Immigrant Student Services, and Dr. Todd Miles, Director of Fire Science, the program provided five students and two community members with opportunities to engage in educational service, cultural immersion, and historical exploration. This article highlights the program's activities, outcomes, and broader implications for global learning.

Community Engagement in Education

One of the program's central components was volunteering in preschool and kindergarten classrooms. Participants were assigned to three rural preschools experiencing limited staffing and financial resources. The project met its primary objectives of supporting host-site educators and facilitating meaningful engagement between participants and students.

Initial interactions with the children were characterized by consistent verbal greetings and welcoming behaviors, suggesting early rapport and mutual openness. As the program progressed, participants navigated language differences by relying on nonverbal communication strategies, including facial expressions, gestures, and shared activities. These interactions provided students

with practical exposure to intercultural communication and illustrated how relational connections can be established in the absence of a shared language.

Participants worked in the schools from 8:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., assisting with daily lessons, games, and art activities. This sustained engagement offered insight into the structure and practices of the Peruvian early childhood education system. Classroom observations revealed extensive reuse of materials and limited physical resources; however, instructional time demonstrated careful stewardship of supplies and adaptive teaching practices. These observations highlighted the creativity and resourcefulness of Peruvian educators in maximizing available materials.

The early childhood program emphasized both play-based learning and structured routines. Each morning, children participated in coordinated group activities in the courtyard that reinforced discipline, cooperation, and civic awareness. Midday meals were served in a family-style format, with children, teachers, and administrators eating together. This practice reinforced communal values and underscored the role of shared routines in fostering connection within the school environment.

The Peruvian lifestyle is one of simplicity, yet it is also challenging. Administrators and parents care for a community garden that provides food for the children. Cusco is fortunate to have two growing seasons, which help to reduce lunch expenses. In Cusco, you will find a wide variety of potatoes and corn. Some vegetables grow best during the wet season, while other varieties thrive in the dry season. Working in the classroom has shown me firsthand the ingenuity of local educators who balance limited resources with creativity and care. Despite the limitations, the children are happy, well cared for, and take pride in being in the classroom.

For many, the classroom connection became the most transformative part of the program. The laughter of children, the exchange of songs and games, and the sense of belonging created memories that extended well beyond the service setting. Student feedback collected after the program reflects a heightened appreciation for global education systems and increased awareness of the resources and opportunities available in their home communities. Participants frequently described the experience as transformative, emphasizing the lasting personal, academic, and cultural perspectives gained through immersive engagement and service activities. Although our time in the classroom was short, it was not lacking in impact. To be a blessing to the classrooms, students pooled their funds together to purchase supplies and games for the children. This connection continues to evolve. One of the principals sends updates on the children's progress and activities, sharing pictures and videos. These ongoing exchanges underscore the power of empathy and compassion, which transcend cultural and linguistic boundaries.

Service-Learning: Playground Renovation

The group completed a service project at one of the local preschools, transforming a faded playground into a vibrant and welcoming environment. Everyone, from Dr. Scott and Dr. Miles to all the participants, worked to create a space that would allow the children to enjoy themselves for years to come. The playground, a concrete slab, was desperately in need of a makeover. After sweeping the area, the painting began. Knees on the ground and backs bent was our posture for two full days. It was a significant undertaking, but we knew the children deserved it. Sore muscles and aching joints proved that we were doing the right thing. When it was completed, everyone looked in awe at what had just been accomplished. The before-and-after pictures cannot compare to how our hearts felt. The renovation not only left a lasting contribution to the school community

but also strengthened students' teamwork, adaptability, and leadership skills. Participants learned firsthand how giving to others can foster equity, sustainability, and long-term community impact.





Cultural Immersion and Historical Exploration

Our participants explored major historical and cultural sites, including Pisaq, Ollantaytambo, the Inca ruins in the Sacred Valley, and Machu Picchu. These visits provided valuable insight into Peru's indigenous history, architecture, and the legacy of the Inca civilization. Students engaged in guided tours and discussions focused on cultural preservation and the significance of these landmarks in Peruvian identity.

In Pisaq, students visited the impressive archaeological complex perched high on a mountain ridge. They observed the intricate agricultural terraces and ancient burial sites carved into the cliffside, gaining insight into how the Incas adapted to the rugged terrain to sustain their communities. Students also watched local Quechua artisans weave textiles from alpaca and llama wool into beautiful garments. Locally sourced precious stones were turned into exquisite pieces, continuing traditions passed down through generations.

Ollantaytambo, known as a living Inca town, offered one of the most immersive experiences of the trip. Students explored the massive stone terraces and fortress that once served as a strategic military, religious, and agricultural hub for the Inca Empire. The site's complex water system and precisely cut stonework demonstrated the Incas' advanced engineering skills, particularly in the design of channels, terraces, and interlocking stones that have endured for centuries. Walking through the still-inhabited town along its original Inca street grid allowed students to observe homes, pathways, and daily routines built on top of ancient foundations, providing a tangible example of how ancient and modern worlds coexist and transforming historical study into a lived experience.

Throughout the Sacred Valley, students explored historically rich Inca sites, gaining a deeper appreciation for the empire's advanced engineering, urban planning, and spiritual beliefs. Guided tours emphasized the importance of these sites not only as architectural marvels, but also as sacred spaces still revered by indigenous communities today. The Sacred Valley is an ongoing expression of traditions and beliefs for the local community.

The journey culminated in a visit to Machu Picchu, one of the New Seven Wonders of the World. Although students reached the site by bus, the steep terrain, high elevation (over 7,900 feet), and extensive walking required to explore the ruins entirely made the experience physically

demanding and unforgettable. As they wandered through the stone corridors, temples, and terraces, students reflected on the Inca's ingenuity and the spiritual significance of the site. Standing on the peaks of Machu Picchu was a humbling experience that allowed us to feel a deep connection to history.

Challenges

This journey was not without its challenges. While traveling to Peru, one of our flights was delayed by over two hours. This caused us to miss our final connecting flight to Cusco. Being stranded in an airport with few English-speaking agents proved our endurance. Tired and frustrated, the students maintained a positive attitude, knowing that they would soon reach their destination. Altitude sickness was another obstacle many had to overcome. Cusco is situated over 11,000 feet above sea level, and the thin air left many struggling with headaches, fatigue, and shortness of breath; yet they showed resilience and determination as they adjusted to the high-altitude environment. Finally, within six hours of leaving our destination, another setback occurred when the group's flight was cancelled. This challenge required adaptability and patience as participants navigated rebooking logistics, with some students facing extended delays before resuming travel. This experience functioned as a real-world test of problem-solving skills and emotional resilience. Student testimonials following the program consistently describe the experience as transformative and emphasize the strong connections formed among participants, underscoring the lasting value of the shared challenges and accomplishments of the study abroad program.

Global Competencies and Student Growth

Although the journey has ended and the group is left with photos and memories, they returned with something that will last a lifetime. They gained global competencies that shaped

them into more empathetic, resilient, and collaborative individuals. The following areas highlight the specific skills and perspectives they developed as part of this transformative experience.

Cultural Awareness and Respect

Students gained a deeper understanding of Peruvian culture, history, and daily life. They developed empathy and appreciation for perspectives different from their own, learning to navigate cultural norms with respect and a sense of curiosity. Volunteering in local schools exposed our students to the challenges that Peruvian children face compared to those in the United States.

Language and Community Skills

Speaking Spanish was the most challenging for our students, who were immersed in a Spanish-speaking environment. However, before the trip, students practiced both verbal and non-verbal communication skills. As they worked with teachers and even students, they gained confidence in using a second language and learned to communicate effectively across language barriers.

Global Citizenship and Responsibility

Through service in the local school and reflection on their experiences, our students began to see themselves as part of a broader global community. They recognized their ability and responsibility to contribute positively to global challenges such as educational equity and cultural preservation.

Adaptability and Problem Solving

Students were frequently challenged to adapt, whether through travel logistics, cultural differences, or service activities. They demonstrated creativity, resilience, and the ability to think on their feet, drawing on past experiences to inform their responses.

Collaborative and Interpersonal Skills

Working closely with peers, local teachers, and community members strengthened students' teamwork, leadership, and collaboration skills, key assets in today's interconnected world.

These competencies not only contributed to the student's personal growth but also aligned with global readiness skills essential for future academic and professional success.

Outcomes and Reflections

Participants in the first study abroad experience demonstrated significant cultural sensitivity, adaptability, and leadership, often navigating unfamiliar situations with growing confidence. The Cusco school community warmly welcomed their presence and support. Teachers, administrators, and students expressed gratitude for the assistance provided in classrooms and for the transformation of the playground.

The 2025 KCKCC study abroad program in Cusco exemplifies the transformative potential of international education at the community college level, demonstrating how integrated service and cultural immersion can cultivate globally competent, empathetic, and adaptable leaders while positively impacting the communities they visit.

Reference

Schenker, T. (2019). Fostering global competence through short-term study abroad. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad, 31*(2), 139–157. https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v31i2.459