

SITE VISITS: IN THE FIELD

Going out in the world to see the site and location (or being “in the field”) where you want to work is an essential part of understanding a project for a course. Use this guide to help consider the ethics, risks, and opportunities of heading off-campus for class.

DO NO HARM

At a minimum, we want to do no harm in the places we visit. Ideally, our relationships are mutually beneficial, where the community gains as much as we learn.

A Challenging History

Universities have a long history of taking more than they give to communities they work with. Examples include:

- Over-surveying with no outputs
- Appearing to “study” the residents
- Taking pictures as if people and places are on display

Serving as a Representative

Off-campus, you are a representative of yourselves, your class, your faculty, the University, and your profession. In some communities, there may be negative impressions of these groups; others may have positive associations. You have the opportunity to shift these perceptions through your actions and demeanor.

Working With Limitations

As a student, you are limited by your time, capacity, skill, knowledge, power, and other factors. Consider setting expectations that align with your limitations, and work within your constraints.

REMEMBER

A “site” is someone’s home, history, and place. Be conscious and respectful of how much a place means to people. Even if there doesn’t seem to be anyone around, think about your visit as going to someone’s home.

WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO LEARN?

Before you go, ask yourself: Why are you going to this place? Maybe it’s an assignment. Maybe you have a specific question. Use the answer to make a plan.

Ask yourself:

- Why are you going to this place?
- What do you hope to get out of your visit?
- What tools do you need to get this?
- What expectations do you have? What biases or preconceived notions?
- What expectations might people in this place have about you?
- How can you be least disruptive to a site?

GET READY TO GO

Being prepared and confident in the details for a visit helps everything run smoothly and lets you focus on observing, engaging, and immersing with people and places.

- Make a plan with your team/class. You may want to consider:
 - Transportation from place to place
 - What clothing you’ll wear to be comfortably and respectfully dressed
 - Schedules
 - Sharing responsibilities with classmates
 - Safety precautions
 - Emergency plans and contacts
 - Inclement weather plans
 - Bringing transit cards and identification

- Collect group logistics in one central place, including contact information, travel, and lodging.

Questions? Email Liz Kramer (kramer@wustl.edu) at the Office for Socially Engaged Practice.

OUT IN THE FIELD OR ON THE SITE

Once you’re off-campus, keep these important considerations in mind.

Pay Attention!

For your safety, be aware of your surroundings:

- Do not text and walk.
- Do not lose track of your surroundings.
- Be aware of intersections, cars, and people.
- Use your best instincts. If you feel uncomfortable, put yourself in a safer location, and ask for help.

Stay Out of Private Property & Buildings

- Have permission to be on the site.
- Do not enter buildings, yards, or spaces that are not clearly open to the public without an invitation from the owner.
- Do not enter any abandoned or damaged buildings or structures.
- Do not force open any doors or gates to gain access to any space.
- Do not climb trees or structures to get a view of a site.

Be Conscious of the Camera

Cameras can be uncomfortable, rude, or even illegal. Consider these suggestions:

- Avoid taking photos of secure buildings, homes, or sites where children gather.
- If you will be doing a lot of photo documentation on site, be prepared to explain why you are taking photos.
- See the Blue Page [Representing People: Photography and Visuals](#) for more information about photos of people.

INTERACT WITH PEOPLE

While you’re out on site, you may encounter people going about their daily life. Conversations with these folks can give you great insight into the activity, context, and history of a site, but you should be thoughtful about your interactions and considerate of people’s time and lived experience.

Have a Description

Decide as a group how you will talk about who you are, what you’re doing, and what will happen as a result of your work. Be consistent in identifying yourselves and setting expectations. Think of this as an introduction to your class!

Starting a Conversation

- Try these tips to get a conversation going:
- In St. Louis, it’s impolite to not make eye contact on the street and say hello.
 - You might want to have a casual conversation starter ready to go, like “What do you know about ...? Have you ever ...”
 - Remember that negative encounters are not representative of a whole community; people have different approaches and perspectives, and patience is essential.
 - Remember to say thank you.

Practice Listening and Humility

- Practice listening and humility when interacting with people. You are learning from their lived experience.
- Ask questions and don’t make assumptions.
 - Make eye contact and actively listen.
 - Listen more than you talk.
 - Prepare questions in advance.

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GOING DEEPER IN THE COMMUNITY

You may want to understand more about the community, even if you are not working directly with the community or a representative organization.

Set Expectations

Be clear about the expectations community members should have for you. Do not over promise what you will do, provide, or communicate, either to individuals or to a whole community.

Participate in Other Ways

There are many ways to get to know a community. Consider:

- Attend a community event.
- Eat at a local restaurant or coffee shop.
- Visit local businesses.
- Volunteer at a local organization.
- Return to the community regularly.

Be Aware of the Space You Take Up

Depending on your own identity and how you present in a community, you may be disruptive just by being present. Be sure you are invited, and be conscious of how much authority you are taking.

REMEMBER

In one visit, or even one semester, you can't fully understand the history, context, or lived experience of a community. Bring your curiosity, question your assumptions, and keep an inquisitive and open mindset.

IN ST. LOUIS AND AROUND THE WORLD

A site visit in St. Louis may be very different than traveling to another city or country. Try to learn about your context.

In St. Louis: You're Not Alone

You will not be the only WashU group in any community in St. Louis. There have been many groups before you, and there will be many after. Leave a positive impression for those who follow. Learn about the work that came before you.

Dynamics in St. Louis are heavily shaped by race, money, and privilege. WashU is part of that context. Try to understand what these mean for the sites you visit.

Across the United States

There may be other Universities or students following the same path you are. Pay attention to these dynamics, and be aware of the burden for communities to support these groups.

Outside the United States

In other countries, there are many complex dynamics to explore. Whenever possible, connect with locals and deeply investigate cultural differences and potential challenges.

Telling the Story

No matter where you are, your authentic representation of a community in your portfolio and reflections can be a valuable contribution to changing narratives.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

These resources can provide additional information about entering and exiting communities.

In-Class Trainings

For more information:

- Gephardt Institute for Civic & Community Engagement (gephardtinstitute.wustl.edu)
- Office for Socially Engaged Practice; contact Liz Kramer (kramer@wustl.edu) for more information.

Other Blue Pages

- [Representing People: Photography & Visuals](#). Representation of people and places is powerful. The use of photography, drawings, and words communicates experiences, opinions, perspectives, and judgments about the people and places. Consider these guidelines for ethical representation.
- [Entering & Exiting Communities](#). This guide goes more in-depth on entering and exiting when working with a partner or a community. Think through the before, during, and after to create a safe and reciprocal experience for communities.

Field Trip Liability Waiver

All students participating in off-campus activities for class must complete a Field Trip Liability Waiver. Check with your faculty member to ensure you've completed this form.