

# CEHS Students Participate in Study Abroad Opportunities Focused on Education and Human Services

08/07/2025



HDFS professors Lisa Boyce and Spencer Bradshaw with graduate students in Shushufindi, Ecuador

This summer, undergraduate and graduate students in the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services (CEHS) at Utah State University participated in a variety of study abroad programs that took them around the world—to Jönköping, Sweden, the Republic of Fiji, and the Sucumbíos Province of Ecuador—to research, support, and learn from the people and communities they visited.

“These diverse study abroad programs provided CEHS students with transformative experiences that broadened their perspectives, deepened cultural understanding, and enhanced their academic and professional growth,” said Shawn Whiteman, interim dean of CEHS. “Participating in study abroad programs like these will improve our educational and health systems by providing future leaders with opportunities for comparison, reflection, and integration as well as prepare students to engage meaningfully in an interconnected world.”

## Gathering Longitudinal Data on Young Children and Parents in Sucumbíos, Ecuador

HDFS professors Lisa Boyce and Spencer Bradshaw, along with researcher Eduardo Ortiz at the Institute for Disability Research, Policy, and Practice, provided training and mentorship for five graduate students who

accompanied them on an ongoing data gathering research trip to the rural Amazon region of the Sucumbíos Province of Ecuador. The group spent 10 days working in two communities, Limoncocha and Coca, with 50 families that have been participants in a collaborative USU and Brigham Young University (BYU) effort to gather unique family, neurocognitive, and nutritional data to address research questions developed in partnership with colleagues in Ecuador.

This was the researchers’ third visit to the region, where they have been returning every other year to gather new data on the young children (at approximately 18 months old in 2021, 3-4 years old in 2023, and now 5-6 years old) and their parents. They are examining diet diversity between families, the psychosocial stimulation between mothers and children, caregiving practices, and family violence, among other things.

Combining their resources with those of their BYU partners, this year the team had access to five fNIRS units (short for Functional Near Infrared Spectroscopy). fNIRS is a non-invasive method of measuring near-infrared light absorption through the skull. Placing a cap on the head of each parent and child participant, the researchers were able to gather much more brain activation data than they have in prior years.

The USU graduate students were integral to the success of the trip. They interacted closely with each family, conducting parent and child interviews, fitting and assessing the children with fNIRS equipment, collecting hair samples, and much more.

“My goal is for our students is to have an experience that takes them out of their comfort zone and puts them in a culture where they can collect data, understand the complexity of the process, and build relationships. I don’t know many universities that provide this type of experience for PhD students,” said Boyce. “It’s hard on them. Seeing the economic hardship and hearing about harsh discipline can be distressing, but the experience is priceless.”

Matthew Cook, a PhD student in HDFS and one of the participating student researchers this year, focuses his research efforts on cognitive and neural development in early childhood. “The best part of being in Ecuador was interacting with the wonderful community members and being welcomed by the individuals as we work with them to understand their lives,” he said. “Having this experience has helped me to realize that I want to do more of this research, where we work with the community to figure out what they need. I really want to continue utilizing

neuroimaging with these communities to get a unique perspective on neural development in a global context.”



USU study abroad participants on the Jönköping University campus

### Examining Healthcare and Social Services in Jönköping, Sweden

Beth Fauth, professor in Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) and director of the state-funded Alzheimer’s Disease and Dementia Research Center, led a group of 15 undergraduate and graduate students on a 10-day study abroad to Jönköping, Sweden. The students were there to investigate the country’s health and social care system.

“Sweden has been considered one of the top countries in aging policy and care for decades,” explains Fauth. “I want students to hear about the Swedish people’s attitudes toward aging and care, their innovative programs and policies, and to ask questions of care providers. I don’t want students to feel like everything in elderly care in Sweden is better than the United States. They should notice similarities and differences and understand why some of the differences have emerged. I also want them to be inspired by some ideas that they can take back to the U.S. if they are interested in working in child or aging services.”

Drawing on Fauth’s 20-year relationship with researchers at the Institute for Gerontology at Jönköping University, the group attended morning lectures and then participated in site visits, including a geriatric ward in a hospital that bypasses traditional emergency room visits, a rural nursing home, and more. This is the sixth study abroad trip Fauth has made with USU students, beginning in 2013. The course is also lifespan focused, as it includes a day examining childcare, youth education, and family policies.

Josey Batura, a graduate student in HDFS and a participant in the 2025 program, says the experience helped to deepen her commitment to incorporating cross-cultural perspectives in the classes

she teaches at USU, especially in discussions around healthcare systems and aging.

Since her return home, Batura has been considering studying in Sweden for her postdoctoral program. “This experience has influenced my professional trajectory by sparking interest in pursuing postdoctoral research in Sweden, where the academic and policy climate felt both rigorous and collaborative,” she said.

The program is expected to be offered again in May of 2027.



Children and teachers at Suva Special School with the USU study abroad participants

### Assisting Special Education Teachers and Children in the Republic of Fiji

In June, 16 students from the Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation Counseling and the School of Teacher Education and Leadership participated in the second annual study abroad program in the Republic of Fiji.

The students were in Fiji for two weeks, providing special education professional development to teachers and instruction to the children in two schools on the island—in the city of Suva, the former capital of Fiji, and in Rakiraki. The students worked in the classrooms for several days in each school and had the opportunity to visit the homes of some of the children and speak with parents to gain perspective on the home life of families raising children with disabilities.

The program was led by Julia Lyman, undergraduate program chair in the Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation Counseling (SPERC) at USU. “The experiences our students had collaborating with teachers, teaching in the classroom, and meeting families was invaluable, and it was evident that the students were impacted by it,” said Lyman.

“This study abroad reinforced my desire to work with students with disabilities and make sure that all students I work with receive the best education possible,” said Cassie Olschewski, a special education major who will graduate in Spring 2026. “The experiences I had played a part in my decision to work toward my master’s and doctoral degrees to continue learning how to best support and advocate for students with special needs, both inside and outside the classroom.”

Lyman recognizes that these international experiences can change the lives of her students. “I hope they will look outside the bubble of being a university student and become a global citizen, seeing the challenges and successes children have in an environment that is much different from their own,” she said.