FAQ Sheet for
Faculty-Led Study Abroad Program in Kyrgyzstan
ANTH 370: Kyrgyzstan: Cultural Diversity and Ethics

COURSE INFORMATION

What does the course content include?
Students who take this course will gain a new understanding of the diversity of human cultures in contemporary societies. The course introduces students to the key anthropological concept of cultural relativism, the idea that we should try to understand cultural differences from the perspective of that culture. Students will also be introduced to the concept of holism in anthropology, the idea that we should consider how different parts of a society (economics, religion, cultural beliefs, politics, music, etc.) are all interconnected.

This course is designed as an anthropology course that will be of interest to STEM majors. Students who complete this course will learn how to apply these key anthropological concepts to real-life ethical dilemmas that they might experience as an engineer or scientist. This includes the sort of ethical dilemmas that might come up when scientists and engineers are working in a culturally diverse workplace in the United States, working on projects with multiple stakeholders (who have different views, values, and perspectives), and/or working on an international project. The class involves multiple discussions about the intersections of culture and ethics. Through these discussions, students will develop an appreciation of the power of culture to define morality and normalcy, and develop skills necessary to communicate respectfully in an increasingly globalized society.

The Kyrgyzstan study abroad section of this course will cover the regular course content, while also introducing students to the cultures of Central Asia and to two of the key engineering projects in the small country of Kyrgyzstan. The Kumtor gold mine (a Canadian-operated mine) is a major source of GDP, while the massive hydroelectric dams on the Naryn River are a source of conflict with neighboring Uzbekistan (due to agricultural water needs). Each of these site visits will illustrate the complex ethical and cultural issues that come up with an international development project of this magnitude. Whether or not students are interested in mining or dams, they should be able to benefit from learning more about the economic, political, cultural, and ethical issues related to these projects.

How does this course fulfill required coursework at Texas A&M?
This course can be used to fulfill a variety of graduation requirements for students at Texas A&M University. The course can be used to fulfill the university’s core curriculum requirement for Language, Philosophy and Culture (LPC), and the university’s International and Cultural Diversity (ICD) requirement. The course has been approved as a Writing Intensive (W) Course (for
anthropology majors and engineering majors). The course has also been approved by the College of Engineering to fulfill the ABET ethics requirement.

**How will I benefit from studying in Kyrgyzstan?**

Kyrgyzstan (officially known as the Kyrgyz Republic) is located in Central Asia. This region of the world that has historically been at the crossroads of several great civilizations and is currently a geopolitically important region of the world situated between Russia, China, India and the Middle East. Kyrgyzstan shares borders with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China. Known as the “Switzerland of Central Asia,” Kyrgyzstan is a small, landlocked country with majestic mountains. Kyrgyzstan is a relatively new country that gained independence when the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991. Since the early 1990s, the country has undergone significant economic and political changes, and has become an important ally to the United States.

The country has approximately 6 million people. The Kyrgyz are the dominant ethnic group, yet the population includes dozens of other ethnic groups (notably Uzbeks, Tajiks, Uighurs, and Russians). The country is also religiously diverse; Islam and Orthodox Christianity are the two primary religions. Traditionally, the Kyrgyz people were nomadic pastoralists, and many people still raise herds of livestock in mountain pastures.

For international travelers, Kyrgyzstan has earned a reputation for being a great destination for outdoor adventure and inexpensive travel.

**What types of assignments will students complete for this course?**

There will be no formal exams for this class. Grades will be based on several different writing assignments - critical reflections (i.e. journal responses to course material and site visits) (25%), short writing assignments (assessing your comprehension and knowledge of reading assignments) (25%), and a final research paper (focusing on a development project in Kyrgyzstan) (40%) - plus class participation (10%). Students who participate in the horseback trek will have slightly different assignment options, with more weight on critical reflections (35%) and less weight on the final research paper (30%). Specifically, students will be expected to complete an additional (longer than usual) critical reflection summarizing their experience with the horseback trek, yet their final research paper will be a few pages shorter.

**Does the group meet as a whole prior to the departure date?**

Yes. Due to the relatively short time in country, we have several class meetings prior to the departure of the trip. There will be four two-hour meetings in April and May on Wednesdays from 5:30 to 7:30 pm. The first meeting will provide travel information from the Study Abroad office. The other two meetings will be normal class meetings. More information will be provided in the future about the dates and locations for these pre-trip meetings.

**Will all assignments be due when we are in Kyrgyzstan?**

No. One or two short writing assignments will be due prior to our departure to Kyrgyzstan. The majority of the short writing assignments (critical reflections and short writing assignments) will be due while we are in Kyrgyzstan. The final assignment, however, will not be due until after we
return from Kyrgyzstan. Final assignments will be due approximately one week before Summer Session I grades are due.

Where will we be in Kyrgyzstan, and what sites will we visit?
Yes! This study abroad course will involve a lot of travel throughout the beautiful countryside of Kyrgyzstan.

This is the tentative itinerary for the trip:
May 11 – Depart College Station
May 13 – Arrive in Bishkek
May 13-19 – Activities in Bishkek
May 20-22 – Travel through Central Kyrgyzstan. Visits to Kambar Ata and Toktogul hydroelectric dams along the Naryn River, with overnights in Chuchkun, Karakul City, and Jalal-Abad City
May 23-24 – Travel to Jalal-Abad and Osh Cities, with overnight in Osh
May 25 – Return to Bishkek; overnight in Bishkek
May 26-29 – Travel to Issyk Kul region, with overnight at a beach camp (Visits to Orto Tokoi dam, Kapchugai Valley, Barskoon Waterfall, and Kumtor Gold Mine)
May 30-June 4 – Optional horseback trek in Issyk Kul region
June 5 – Depart from Bishkek

This is a brief description of the sites that we’ll visit:

**Bishkek.** We will spend approximately a week in the capital city of Bishkek, a city with approximately 900,000 residents. Bishkek is located in the Chui Valley of the Tien Shan mountain range. It is a relatively new city that was founded by Uzbek khan of Kokand in the early 19th century. The city then became the site of a Russian military fortress as the Russian empire expanded into Central Asia. The central part of the city resembles a Russian planned city with its grid structure, wide boulevards flanked by irrigation canals and large trees. In 1926, the city was renamed Frunze (after a Russian Bolshevik leader) and became the capital of the new Kyrgyz Republic of the Soviet Union. The city contains many architectural features from the Soviet era, including Soviet-style monuments, Soviet-era factories, and multi-storied apartment buildings. In 1991, the city was renamed Bishkek once again, and became the capital of independent Kyrgyzstan. The city of Bishkek has grown significantly, and Soviet look to the city has slowly disappeared with the emergence of new modern buildings, trendy restaurants, boutique hotels, and new Kyrgyz monuments.

Within Bishkek, we will go on field trips to the national history museum and the fine art museum. We will also visit nearby sites, including the Ala Archa National Park where we will hike in a pristine alpine setting, and the Ata Beyit Memorial where we will learn more about several tragic events in Kyrgyzstan’s recent history. From Bishkek, we will make a day trip to the Burana Tower, a massive minaret that was once part of the ancient Silk Road city of Balasagun.

**Travel through Central Kyrgyzstan to Ferghana Valley.** We will spend several days travelling through Kyrgyzstan, where you will have the chance to enjoy the majestic beauty of Kyrgyzstan’s
mountains and valleys. You’ll learn about the country’s nomadic past, its experiences with Soviet collective farming, and the post-Soviet transition to a market economy. Along the way, we will visit two of the important dams along the mighty Naryn River – the Kambar Ata dam and the Toktogul Dam.

**Jalal-Abad.** Jalal-Abad is one of two cities we will visit in the Ferghana Valley, the agricultural heart of Central Asia. Jalal-Abad, situated near the border of Uzbekistan, has a population of nearly 100,000 people. The city is known for its mineral springs, walnuts, and beautiful scenery. We will have a short tour of the city of Jalal-Abad.

**Osh.** In a country that is known for a North-South division, Osh is considered to be the “capital of the south” as well as the oldest city in the country. The city, which is estimated to be over 3,000 years old, was a major stop along the famed Silk Road. The city’s sprawling outdoor bazaar remains a vibrant trade center, connecting Kyrgyzstan to neighboring countries, and the city atmosphere is more archetypically Central Asian than the capital city of Bishkek. Today, the city has a mixed population of nearly 300,000 residents, including a sizable population of Uzbeks (over 40%). In 2010, a violent ethnic conflict took place between Kyrgyz and Uzbek residents, leading to the deaths of at least 400 people. During our visit to Osh, we will visit the Suleiman Too Sacred Mountain (named after King Solomon), Suleiman Too National Historical and Archaeological Museum Complex, the city bazaar, the Shaid Tepa mosque, and Suleiman Too Mosque (Osh’s “new” mosque).

**Issyk Kul Region.** The Issyk Kul region of Kyrgyzstan is one of most popular tourist destinations within Kyrgyzstan. The region is named after Lake Issyk Kul (“hot lake”), the second largest saline lake in the world (after the Caspian Sea). The region is popular with tourists from surrounding countries of Central Asia who come to enjoy the beach settings and Soviet-era “sanatoriums” or health resorts. International tourists often visit the region to participate in outdoor activities, such as trekking, climbing, rafting, kayaking, skiing and horseback riding. During our visit to Issyk Kul region, we will travel to several destinations along the southern shore of the lake, including Kumtor Gold Mine (located near Issyk Kul). We will stop for hike in the Kapchugai Valley and a hike to Barskoon Waterfall. We will also learn how to build a Kyrgyz yurt, and have an opportunity to go on a short horseback ride in a mountain valley.

**Who is the Instructor?**
This is a faculty-led study abroad program taught by Dr. Cynthia Werner. Dr. Werner has been a professor at Texas A&M since 2001, and is currently the Head of the Anthropology Department. She has been conducting research in Central Asia for over 25 years, and served as the President of the Central Eurasian Studies Society (from 2012 to 2015). She received her B.A. in Political Science from Texas Christian University, and her M.A. and Ph.D., both in Anthropology, from Indiana University. Her research focuses on economic, environmental, and gender issues within the post-socialist states of Central Asia (especially Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and the Kyrgyz Republic). Dr. Werner has conducted research on rural survival strategies in a post-socialist context, gift exchange and bribery, international tourism development, transnational migration, and bride abduction. Dr. Werner is also an experienced equestrian. Her initial interest in Central
Asia developed out of an interest in the horses and horse culture of Central Asia. She has two horses of her own, and regularly competes in dressage, jumping and eventing horse shows near College Station.

**Is this course limited to students from the College of Engineering?**
No. Engineering majors and Anthropology majors will have some priority when it comes to enrollment, but students from any major can register for this class.

**Will I have a chance to meet local people?**
Yes! Students will have opportunities to interact with local people on a daily basis. The structured program will include lectures from local citizens of Kyrgyzstan. In addition, two English-speaking students from Kyrgyzstan will be travelling with our group throughout the standard program as a resource to provide an insider perspective on daily life in Kyrgyzstan. Similarly, students on the horseback trek will have an opportunity to talk to English-speaking guides who will help translate conversations with Kyrgyz herders. You will also have an opportunity to meet local people on a daily basis during unstructured parts of the day.

**Do I need to know a foreign language?**
No, but if you’re willing to learn, you will have the opportunity to learn a little bit of Russian and Kyrgyz. English will be the language of instruction for the course. Guest lecturers will either speak in English, or have a translator. Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Russian are common languages used by the people of Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz and Uzbek are Turkic languages that use a Cyrillic alphabet. Throughout the country, some signs can be found in English (or in Latin script).

**OPTIONAL HORSEBACK TREK**

**How much does the horseback trek cost?**
One of the highlights of this trip is an optional horseback trek in the mountains of Kyrgyzstan near Lake Issyk Kul. All students who sign up for this course will have the option of staying in Kyrgyzstan for an additional week to participate in the horseback trek. The trek is an additional $600. This cost includes costs for horse, tent, sleeping bag, meals, guides, and transfers. Students who participate in the horseback trek will have the opportunity to learn more about life in rural Kyrgyzstan during encounters with Kyrgyz nomads and their livestock.

**Do I need to have previous experience horseback riding?**
No, you do not need to be an experienced rider in order to participate in the trek, as long as you are comfortable around horses. You will be given basic instructions on how to ride. Horses are herd animals, and will follow the lead horse. Depending on the number of participants, the group will be divided into two based on riding experience; the group of more experienced riders will travel at a slightly faster pace than the other group.

**How much time will we have in the saddle each day?**
We will be riding approximately six hours a day with a break for lunch each day.
TRAVEL LOGISTICS

Will we travel there as a group?
Yes and no. As we get closer to the trip departure date, the Instructor and/or Study Abroad Programs office will identify a recommended flight to and from Kyrgyzstan. This flight is likely to involve travel through the Istanbul airport. Participants will be responsible for purchasing their own tickets to Kyrgyzstan. Students may opt to travel with a different airline or to travel on different days (as long as they arrive before the first day of class in Kyrgyzstan).

Do I need a visa?
No. International travelers from most Western countries (including the United States) do not need a visa for stays less than 60 days. You will need a passport (valid for at least six months after your scheduled arrival date), just as you would need to travel to any foreign country. Please note that if you choose to travel to Kyrgyzstan through Russia or Kazakhstan, you may need to obtain a transit visa for Russia or Kazakhstan. Similarly, you may need a visa if you choose to travel to neighboring countries (such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, or China) at the end of the course.

What will the accommodations be like?
The accommodations will be modest. In Bishkek, students will stay in dormitories at the London School of Languages and Cultures in downtown Bishkek (https://thelondonschool.org/en/). Each room contains two full-sized beds, a private bathroom, a washing machine (but no dryer), and a hot plate (for limited cooking). The London School has a cafeteria with inexpensive meals. There are restaurants and cafes nearby. In other locations, we will stay in simple hotels and/or yurt camps. Students who participate in the horseback trek will stay in tents.

What do I need to bring?
In general, you will want to pack light for this trip since we will be travelling quite a bit. More information will be provided prior to departure on clothing. Most toiletries can be purchased in Bishkek. Sleeping bags and tents will be provided for participants in the horseback trek.

What is the food like in Kyrgyzstan?
Throughout the trip, you will have the opportunity to experience the rich cuisine of Kyrgyzstan. Traditional Kyrgyz food involves dishes with mutton, beef, horse meat, and dairy products. Favorite dishes are beshbarmak (boiled meat served over homemade noodles), shashlik (skewered chunks of grilled meat and fat), manty (steamed dumplings with meat or pumpkin), samsa (pastry dumplings similar to Indian samosas), paloo (a rice pilaf dish served with meat and carrots). All meals are typically served with homemade bread and tea. One of the popular drinks in Kyrgyzstan in the summertime is kymyz, fermented mare’s milk. Many restaurants also serve common Russian dishes, such as pelmeni and borscht. Students with special dietary needs should let the instructor know prior to the departure date in order to ensure that meals will be adjusted accordingly.
How will I be able to stay in contact with family and friends in the U.S.?
Some but not all of our local accommodations will have wifi available. Internet cafes and other sites with wifi access are not hard to find in the major cities of Kyrgyzstan. You should be able to send text messages to the U.S. and/or use Facetime from any location where wifi is available. The group leader will have an international cell phone for emergencies.