

FOREGROUND / NOW



LEFT

Landscape architecture students at Iowa State University spend a foundational semester exploring the landscapes of the central United States.

BOTTOM

The Traveling Savanna Studio program introduces students from inside and outside the region to the cultural and geological diversity of the Midwest.

BACKYARD ROAD TRIPS

FOR 20 YEARS IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS HAVE EXPLORED THE DIVERSE LANDSCAPES OF THE CENTRAL UNITED STATES.

BY JARED BREY

Undergraduate students in Iowa State University's landscape architecture program spend up to six weeks of their first sophomore semester on the road, exploring the profoundly altered savanna lands of the central United States. As part of the requirements of the Traveling Savanna Studio, students have journeyed from Canada to Mexico, through Minneapolis and San Antonio, sometimes putting as many as 4,000 miles on their vans in the course of a semester. A recent syllabus states the goal of the studio is "to understand 'landscape' by actively observing all aspects of it—including landform, vegetation, architecture, urban form, culture, and art." In the past two decades, the Savanna Studio has become the cornerstone of the Iowa State program, establishing lasting bonds between students and their instructors. In 2019, the studio alumni marked its 20th anniversary with bonfires and singing.

Last year, the faculty at Iowa State published the results of a survey they conducted in an effort to assess the

influence of the traveling studio on students' lives and careers. The authors sent surveys to 437 students who participated in the program between 2000 and 2019 and collected 207 usable responses. They asked the students to self-identify the benefits of the program and to assess the effect on their personal and professional growth. Responses orbited around a few themes, the authors wrote, including "increased communication skills, increased self-sufficiency, positive relationship building, increased exposure to diverse cultures, and a more open-minded outlook."

Many students enter Iowa State from rural areas in the Midwest, and for lots of them, the Savanna Studio is their first extended travel experience—even their first time exploring big cities, says Hans Klein-Hewett, ASLA, an assistant professor at



NATE BREYER, ASLA

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ABOVE

In a recent survey, former students reported positive impacts from the studio experience, including exposure to new places and improved social skills.

Iowa State and the lead author of the study, who is also a graduate of the program. (He didn't complete the survey, which he codesigned with Ann M. Gansemer-Topf, an associate professor in the School of Education.) For students who come from outside the region, or the country, the Savanna Studio is an introduction to the environmental and cultural diversity of the "flyover states," he says.

More than 85 percent of respondents identified as white, which is not surprising given the demographics of the student body, Klein-Hewett says. But it may help explain some of the racial differences in reported benefits: Midwestern and white students mentioned more benefits overall than BIPOC students and students from outside the region, and BIPOC students were significantly less likely to say that building relationships with other students and faculty was a benefit of the experience. That's one aspect of the program that needs much closer consideration, he says.

"If I'm honest, we may be focusing our experience around trying to educate and broaden the experiences of predominantly rural white kids, because that's most of what our student body is," Klein-

Hewett says. The faculty has discussed ways to address those disparities but hasn't made any concrete changes yet. The school is also in the process of hiring a new tenure-track professor who will eventually lead the Savanna Studio, Klein-Hewett says.

Still, the studio has been a touchstone for many of the students who've gone through it, and a shared experience for many landscape architects practicing in the region. Lara Guldenpfennig, ASLA, the president of the Iowa chapter of ASLA, took the course in 2001, traveling through Winnipeg in Manitoba, Canada; Peoria, Illinois; Dubuque, Iowa; Chicago; Dallas; and northern Mexico in two three-week trips. Students from the Midwest often want to leave the region after college, she says. But students who participate in the Traveling Savanna Studio, and who are exposed to various alumni firms and practices, often see there's more than just family ties to draw them home. Elite schools in coastal cities may have more resources, but few schools offer such intensive explorations of their surrounding regions, she says.

"It's its own little niche, and we're pretty proud of it," Guldenpfennig says. ●

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