Field Schools:
Transferability of Credit

A BCCAT Special Report

Prepared by Dr. Fiona McQuarrie, Special Projects Coordinator, BCCAT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Field schools are incorporated into programs at many BC post-secondary institutions. However, the transferability of credits associated with field school experiences appears to be limited within the BC Transfer System. This may be due to institutions preferring or requiring field school courses to be supervised by their own faculty; field school courses being structured to meet the requirements of a specific program at an individual institution; limited student demand for these courses to be transferable; and/or field schools being timetabled as special topics courses or cross-listed courses, which may limit their transferability.

This special report makes several recommendations around increasing the transferability of field school credit:

• For institutions to jointly operate field schools, with the associated course credit being accepted by all participating institutions;

• For a centralized information site at which information on field school opportunities could be exchanged (which could be administered by individual articulation committees) in the Articulation Committee Forums section on BCCAT’s Articulation Information Centre (bcat.ca/info/forums/articulation-committee-forums);

• For institutions to consider coding field school courses in ways that will improve the courses’ transferability;

• For institutions to timetable field school courses as regular courses rather than as special topics or directed studies courses;

• For institutions to regularly request articulation of field school courses; and,

• For institutions to collaborate internally on field school opportunities.
Learning experiences outside a classroom-based lecture setting are recognized as a valuable component of education and training in many academic disciplines (Guinness, 2012). The use of field schools as part of curricula in BC post-secondary institutions contributes to producing graduates with real-world skills and well-rounded knowledge. While there are many considerations associated with planning and successfully operating field schools, the purpose of this report is to focus on the issues around the transferability of academic credit associated with field school participation, and to recommend ways in which this transferability can be enhanced within the BC Transfer System.

The operational definition of “field school” used in this report is a short-term (less than one semester) off-campus activity conducted for academic credit by a program or institution. A field school may be one component of a credit course, or may be a credit course on its own. This report will not include considerations related to off-campus activities that last for a semester or longer (e.g., exchange programs or semester-abroad programs), although elements of this discussion and its recommendations may be useful to institutions operating such programs.
INTRODUCTION TO FIELD SCHOOLS
AND RESEARCH ON FIELD SCHOOL ISSUES

Field schools can incorporate a number of learning styles, including observation, participation, and learner-practitioner involvement (Kent, Gilbertson, & Hunt, 1997). Field schools can also be structured around cases involving specific situations at the research site (Rea & Hodder, 2007). The actual fieldwork itself can also take different forms. It can be a visit to existing local, regional, national or international sites, such as a museum tour in a visual arts program; it can be a activity-based trip focused on an activity designed specifically for the trip, such as specimen collection in a science course; it can also involve participation in an ongoing research project at a specific site, such as an archaeological excavation. Field schools can also involve classroom sessions before or after the field experience, and can incorporate coursework at an academic institution located in the geographic region where the field school is taking place (Stanitski & Fuellhart, 2007). The academic credit associated with field schools can be assigned in different ways. The field experience itself can be the course and can be given credit on its own. Students can also select field experience options of different lengths, and different amounts of credit may be assigned to different lengths of participation. The amount of credit awarded for a field school may also depend on the amount or type of activities that students participate in during the field school. Field experience can also be a single evaluation component in a course that might include other elements such as lectures, assignments, or examinations.

Student interest in field school participation is reasonably strong. The 2012 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) indicates that 74% of first-year students and 63% of fourth-year students at Canadian post-secondary institutions plan to undertake, or have already completed, some form of off-campus learning activity for credit (NSSE, 2012). The NSSE data do not distinguish between intentions to participate in such activities and actual participation, so it is difficult to determine actual amounts of student involvement in field school experiences. However, it has been suggested that field schools are becoming less of a priority at some institutions due to the high cost of operating field-based programs (Maw, Mauchline & Park, 2011; Johnson, 2013), and the difficulties of determining faculty workload allocations associated with fieldwork (Haigh & Gold, 1993). While there are disciplines where fieldwork is considered a significant part of learning, the actual amount or type of fieldwork in a particular program may vary depending on the resources of the specific school and the qualifications or training of faculty members (Maw, Mauchline & Park, 2011).

Historically, it has also been difficult to quantitatively measure changes in learning associated with field school participation (Easton & Gilburn, 2012; Redden, 2013), although some studies have identified increases in students’ course grades after participation in a field school, independent of the grading associated with the field school itself. However, the impact of field school participation may not be consistent across subsequent courses (Easton & Gilburn, 2012).
Students who have participated in fieldwork indicate that they feel it enhances their knowledge of the subject and that it gives them skills that will be useful in their careers. Students who have participated in fieldwork indicate that they feel it enhances their knowledge of the subject and that it gives them skills that will be useful in their careers (Boyle et al., 2007).

It has, though, been suggested that the amount of student learning from a field school experience may be affected by the student’s degree of engagement within the field school setting. Students who are encouraged to actively inquire and observe may acquire more knowledge of the setting or context (Black & Duhon, 2006; Tajes & Ortiz, 2010), but students who interact primarily with other students, especially in an international setting, may only report a modest contribution to their general education (Rourke & Kanaka, 2012) or a limited improvement in specific areas such as language acquisition (Bataller, 2010; Lindsyth, 2010). A consistent concern in discussions of field school experiences is students who view the experience more as tourism than as academic work: a concern which, it has been proposed, could be somewhat addressed by greater intentionality in determining the purpose and desired learning outcomes from field schools (Redden, 2013).

Cost has also been discussed as an important factor affecting the educational impact of field schools. The cost of participating in field schools - not only the tuition cost, but also the costs associated with travel and accommodation - may be a barrier to participation for some students. Increasing expectations that students should pay even more of the costs associated with the delivery of field schools may result in the learning from fieldwork opportunities only being available to those students financially able to participate (Stanitski & Fuellhart, 2007).

It has also been suggested that field schools do not have a good academic reputation, partially because of misunderstandings of their purposes or content, and partially because of “poor learning and teaching practices” (Haigh & Gold, 1993). These can include inadequate preparation of students prior to the field experience, the lack of feedback to students, and the lack of integration of the field school experience or knowledge into the rest of the course.

To be successful, field schools should have clearly defined objectives; undergo a formal and documented risk assessment; prepare students in advance, which should include briefings not only on academic contexts but also logistics and safety; and be led by academic staff who are also well prepared (Kent, Gilbertson & Hunt, 1997). Field school experiences can be shared within institutions among participants and staff to facilitate improvements and refinements (Trede, 2010).
EXISTING RESEARCH ON TRANSFERABILITY OF CREDIT FROM FIELD SCHOOLS

BCCAT has funded two research projects relating to transferability of credit from field school courses. One, in 2002, investigated transfer agreements for post-secondary biology courses involving fieldwork. The project found 65 biology fieldwork courses regularly offered by BC Transfer System member institutions, of which the majority were transferable both within and outside BC. BCCAT’s Principles and Guidelines for Transfer were identified as being relevant for assessing the transferability of field school courses as well as for classroom-based courses (Piccin & Dickinson, 2002). The other project, in 2009, looked at transfer issues around international field school courses. This project identified fewer than 100 international field school courses or programs in the BC Transfer Guide. However, it also noted that many institutions only offer field school courses at the 300- and 400-level, and courses at this level may not be regularly included in the BC Transfer Guide (Glen, 2009). Both reports also noted that students taking 300- and 400-level courses are not as likely to transfer between schools or programs as students taking lower-level courses. However, transferring field school courses, especially at the 300- or 400-level, could be problematic if the student intended to use the transferred course to fulfill a specific program requirement, but the receiving institution awarded unassigned, elective, or lower-level transfer credit.
ISSUES AFFECTING TRANSFERABILITY
OF FIELD SCHOOL COURSES

An examination of transfer credit agreements currently in the BC Transfer Guide involving field school courses indicates that when transfer credit is awarded for such courses, the credit is almost always unassigned subject credits by level (e.g., Sociology 2XX), and not credit for equivalent courses. It is also noticeable that field school courses appear to have more associated transfer credit if the course is in a discipline where field experience is an established part of the curriculum (e.g., biology, geography). Courses in other disciplines where field school experience is less common often do not have articulation agreements in the BC Transfer Guide.

This situation suggests that there may be a number of issues affecting the transferability of field school courses offered by BC Transfer System member institutions.

- Field school courses may be designed to fulfill the requirements of a specific program at a specific institution, and thus the courses may not be structured with the intention of being transferable. Students intending to complete such programs may not be concerned about course transferability if they have no plans to move to another post-secondary institution. Likewise, institutions offering field school courses may not be requesting articulation for these courses if they feel there is little student demand for the course to be transferable.

- The lack of transferability of field school courses may be similar to the lack of transferability of practicum-based courses, in which a student undertakes a work placement under the supervision of a faculty member. In a number of disciplines represented in the BC Transfer System, the transferability of practicum-based courses is limited or non-existent. Programs wanting to ensure consistency in their graduating students’ skills may require that practicum-based courses be taken at that institution, so that students can be placed in appropriate practicum settings and evaluated by the institution’s own faculty members. It is possible that a similar reasoning is employed when assessing the transferability of field school courses. The receiving institution may decline to award transfer credit if the policy of the relevant program is that field work courses or credits must be completed at that institution.

- The scheduling, content, or location of field school courses may depend on factors such as availability, accessibility, or educational opportunities at the field school site, or the academic or research interests of the supervising faculty member. Because of these kinds of variables, a field school course may be timetabled as a special topics or directed studies course, possibly with a great deal of content variation from previous offerings of the same course. This designation and/or change in content would likely further restrict its perceived transferability.
A field school course may be timetabled as a cross-listed course\(^1\), to increase the potential number of students who can enroll. If a cross-listed course is submitted for articulation, the amount or type of transfer credit it receives may be limited if the course is not submitted for articulation under all the applicable course names and numbers. Likewise, an evaluator in a specific discipline at a receiving institution may be unable to determine how much of the cross-listed course’s content is relevant to that individual discipline, or whether there is enough relevant content for the cross-listed course to be awarded course-to-course transfer credit.

Although field schools may present operational challenges for institutions, they can provide great educational opportunities for students by enhancing knowledge of a subject, providing experience in conducting research, and increasing their ability to understand and function in unfamiliar settings (Johnson, 2013). As the mandate of the BC Council on Admission and Transfer is to facilitate "admission, articulation, and transfer arrangements among BC post-secondary institutions for the benefit of students"\(^2\) [emphasis added], we now provide several recommendations for how the transferability of field schools can be enhanced.

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\(^{1}\) A course which is timetabled under two or more course names and numbers, although the course is effectively offered as a single course, with the same instructor and content, and with all enrolled students working together.

\(^{2}\) bccat.ca/about/council/projects-and-activities
RECOMMENDATIONS

Jointly Operated Field Schools

As noted in the literature reviewed above, the cost of field schools is drawing more scrutiny. Given the additional costs usually associated with incorporating field school experiences within programs, institutions may be interested in mitigating such costs by participating in jointly operated field schools. These are usually administered by a single host institution, with faculty or staff from other institutions involved in curriculum design, academic facilitation, and operations. Enrollment in the field school is open to students at any of the participating institutions. This form of structuring and operating field schools has several potential benefits related to transferability:

• By involving faculty or staff from multiple institutions, the field school can give students access to academic credit involving faculty or institutional expertise that may be limited or unavailable at their own institution. This can enhance the students’ educational experience and range of disciplinary expertise, without the cost or challenge of undertaking further study at another institution.

• The cost to the host institution of operating the field school could be offset by potentially higher enrollments if students at more than one institution are able to participate. However, including students from other institutions may require additional logistical planning if, for example, students in the field school course are expected to participate in classroom-based sessions prior to or following the field school.

• If the field school can be structured so that students can enroll in the associated course at their own institution (i.e., each institution participating in the field school timetables the field school as its own course), transferability would not be an issue, as students would not be enrolling in a course at another institution which they would then have to arrange to transfer. However, there should be as much consistency as possible in tuition costs or additional fees charged for the course across all institutions participating in the field school.

• If the field school is structured so that the host institution offers the associated course, students from participating institutions may find it easier to obtain transfer credit for the course, or to obtain a letter of permission (LOP)\(^3\) to take the course as a visiting student, because of their own institution’s involvement in the field school.

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\(^3\) A document that gives a student permission to take a course at an institution other than the institution in which he or she is currently enrolled. The LOP is issued by the student’s current institution. It verifies that the current institution approves the student enrolling in the other institution for the purposes of taking the other course, and that the current institution will accept the other institution’s course for transfer credit toward its own program(s).
However, it should be noted that for a jointly operated field school to be feasible, all participating institutions need to agree on an appropriate location, format, and curriculum; student eligibility (e.g., pre-requisite courses or other academic qualifications); the roles of participating faculty or staff members; acceptable risk management practices; and the financial and operational responsibilities of each participating institution.

A Centralized Information Site

In discussions at a number of BC articulation committee meetings, representatives of some institutions have indicated a willingness to accept transfer credit for field school courses if they were aware of appropriate field school opportunities at other institutions that their students could participate in. Representatives of other institutions have indicated that they have had to cancel planned field school courses because not enough students were enrolled, but that they would have been willing to accept enrollments from students at other institutions.

A centralized information site for field schools could productively address situations such as these, and would be relatively simple to establish and administer. The site could be dedicated to field school opportunities in a specific discipline, field school opportunities in a particular geographic region, or field school opportunities in general. Such a site could serve several functions:

- Providing lists of the field school courses offered at each institution and the name and contact information of the faculty member(s) or department(s) responsible for each course. This could facilitate transfer by raising awareness of these courses, and by clearly identifying the institutional source of information about each course.

- Providing lists of upcoming field school opportunities that are open to students from other institutions or programs. This could facilitate transfer by publicizing field school opportunities far enough in advance so that interested students could plan to participate, and could make arrangements for transfer credit if necessary. The promotion of such opportunities outside the host institution could also facilitate additional student enrollment that would support the operation of the field school.

- Offering a forum for discussions about field schools. This could facilitate transfer by sharing ideas, experiences, and advice that might improve the curriculum or operations of field school courses, and by creating opportunities for collaboration and information exchanges.

Articulation committees wishing to facilitate such discussions may be able to do so using the Articulation Committee Forums on the BCCAT Articulation Information Center: bccat.ca/info/forums/articulation-committee-forums. Committees who do not have a forum already set up can contact BCCAT to ask that one be established for them.
Coding of Field School Courses

While cross-listing field school courses may open the course to a wider range of students within an institution, cross-listing may be problematic in requesting transfer credit or assessing such requests. Institutions or programs wanting to increase transferability of field school courses should consider the issue of transferability when deciding whether to cross-list a course. If the course is cross-listed, transfer possibilities will be enhanced if requests for articulation are submitted for every course name under which the field school course has been timetabled.

Timetabling Field School Courses as Regular Courses

Field school courses may be offered as special topics courses or directed studies courses because the subject or content of the course does not fit that of regular courses; because the curriculum of a specific field school may be designed to fit the interests of participating faculty or students; or because a field school opportunity is not formalized soon enough to timetable it as a regular course, or to obtain institutional approval for it as a new regular course. While these are all valid reasons for field schools to be timetabled as directed studies or special topics courses, institutions should remember that directed studies or special topic credits are often difficult for students to transfer elsewhere. Institutions should consider timetabling field school courses as regular or standardized courses whenever possible, if transferability may be a future issue for students in the course.

Regularly Requesting Articulation for Field School Courses

As noted above, many field school courses are designed to meet the needs of a particular institution or program, or to take advantage of a particular field school opportunity. Thus, articulation may not be requested for these courses if it is anticipated that few, if any, students will want to transfer the course credit elsewhere. However, having transfer credit associated with a field school course creates more transfer opportunities for students. Having a publicly available record of the course’s transferability may also attract more students to the course. Institutions or programs may thus want to consider submitting all field school courses for articulation through the Transfer Credit Evaluation System (TCES) to create a greater range of opportunities for their students.

Internal Collaboration on Field Schools

Within individual institutions, field school courses are operated by individual departments or programs within standardized procedures established by the institution, but there is often little awareness of similar activities in other departments or programs. Internal information sharing across departments and programs by faculty and staff involved in field school courses could improve the quality of the field school experience, and also create opportunities for interdisciplinary development or collaboration. This type of information sharing could be facilitated by regular meetings of a field school committee or working group, with representation from all departments or programs involved in field schools, or by an internal centralized information site. The shared information could increase the transferability of field school courses by enhancing their content and relevance.
REFERENCES


