

Independent Participant Travel/Work

Direct experience in field conditions without direct supervision is a powerful educational tool. Independent participant work/travel in the field gives your participants the opportunity to develop competence with many field-related skills. Furthermore, many field experiences necessitate students/participants working or traveling in the field without instructors or expedition leaders. Examples of this range from hiking for an entire day in small groups without instructors to performing field work alone (or with a small group) at a remote field site.

As a field leader/teacher, you need to balance the likelihood of a beginner's error against the benefit/necessity of the activity. A progression of training, activities, and experiences should be used to build knowledge, skills, and competence before allowing participants to work independently in remote field settings.

Generally, the degree of independence to give participants should depend on:

- Your participant's ability
- The level of risk (see chapter ____ on Risk evaluation)
- The educational or research goals of an activity

Here are 3 guidelines to help your participants safely work/travel independently in the field:

Actively Prepare your Students for Independent Field Time (see also section on Getting Lost in the appendix)

- Set firm expectations of participants and use a clear training progression. Work with participants in the field first before allowing them to work on their own. Teach the specific skills that are relevant to your research or class, but also teach/ role-model wilderness skills necessary for safely working/traveling in the field. These skills might include:
 - Environmental safety (e.g. working safely in hot dry environments, staying safe in steep unstable terrain, river safety, etc.)
 - Basic First Aid skills. Consider teaching participants basic skills of stabilizing a patient and managing for immediate life threats (ABCs). If possible, place at least one participant with first aid training in each independent team.
 - Route-finding and navigation skills. Give out maps to each team member. Drill them on paying attention to where they are on a map as you travel with them. Let them practice while in your presence.
 - Effective Leadership and Communication. Role-model this all the time as an instructor/leader. See chapter ____ for more explicit ways to set clear expectations and foster safe teamwork among your group members.
 - Basic Risk Evaluation skills. See chapter ____ for more information on this.
- Ensure participants carry minimal survival gear when traveling/working in remote field settings, such as:
 - First aid supplies
 - Warm layers, rain layers
 - Water and Food
 - Headlight
 - Maps and other navigation equipment
 - Cell phone, radio, or satellite phone if available

- Brief participants on their route of travel or scope of work. Go over route plans with them, including things like estimated distance, travel time, important landmarks or site boundaries to look for, anticipated hazards (including weather), contingency plans, what to do if lost or someone gets injured, meetup times and locations, etc.
- If appropriate, establish a leadership structure within a participant group. This could simply involve putting one participant in charge of helping their group make important decisions during their time away from instructors.
- Always role-model safe conservative decision-making with your group. The more you do this, the more likely your participants are to mimic you.

Maintain careful observation/supervision of student performance

- Pay attention to each participant in your group. It doesn't take long to observe who is more competent with certain skills, who follows your lead more readily, who is/isn't organized, punctual, and helpful, who demonstrates effective peer leadership within the group, etc. Don't hesitate to discuss these behaviors with your instructor team.
- Coach your participants and give them feedback with the goal of developing the skills you want to see in them before allowing them to work independently.
- Consider using the following supervisory techniques:
 - Let student groups work alone, but check on them periodically throughout the day. If cell phones are available, establish a time to call them to check in.
 - Shadow student travel groups before letting them travel alone in the field. Do this by staying within visual contact of your group. This allows your group to make their own decisions but gives you the opportunity to quickly intervene if necessary.
 - Meet at hazards. Have independent traveling participant groups meet instructors at a potential hazard along the hike (such as a river crossing or confusing section of trail/terrain).
 - Debrief independent travel/work groups once you meet up with them later in the day. Help them reflect and learn from how they managed any risks that came up and how they worked together to mitigate these risks. Address any communication or conflict issues that came up. See Chapter ___ for more on facilitating effective communication in your group.

Make deliberate thoughtful decisions of when to let participants work independently. Be mindful of the following skills among the participants in your group. Try to spread these skills out within any smaller field groups you create for independent travel/work in the field:

- Technical skills (specific to your research or educational purpose)
- Outdoor Field skills, including outdoor living skills and travel skills
- Hazard Evaluation skills
- First Aid Skills
- Leadership, Communication, and decision-making skills
- Getting-along-well-with-others skills (patience, good listening, positive attitude, etc.)