

Education Abroad for Adult Students

ASK ANYONE ON CAMPUS about adult students who study abroad. Most likely, the response will be surprise or even a quizzical look. The common misconception is that adult students aren't interested in study abroad or that they can't do it because of the other commitments in their lives such work or family obligations.

The image of students studying abroad that comes to mind is of young adults who are 18 to 21 years old. It seems ironic that this age group is described as the "traditional age" for college students when, according to government statistics, more than 40 percent of all college and university students are older than 24 years of age. Yes, a slight majority of students technically do fall into this "traditional" group, but it should give us

pause that given the relatively even proportions, we, as education abroad advisers, usually don't even stop to question our assumptions.

There are few concrete statistics about our adult students who study abroad, but we do know that there are programs that serve this group—and we know something about these learners. Beyond such programs as Elderhostel and alumni travel offerings, a fair number of institutions across the country offer programs for older students, either for credit or just for the sake of the learning.

Susan McGury, coordinator of international programs at the School for New Learning at DePaul University, has led hundreds of students ranging from 24 to 85 years old to Europe and Asia; in addition, she has helped other faculty develop their programs and served as a consultant and presenter to educators from throughout the world. The programs she oversees tend to be embedded within courses that begin before a travel period of two to four weeks and finish afterward and are geared to help students develop competency in such varied areas as intercultural fluency, artistic or societal analysis, and the development of learning skills. Her students are often first-time travelers when they enroll, but many return for multiple programs, having discovered the power of global experience. While admitting that there are often challenges working with adults—such as the very pragmatic, can-do attitude of one who said she had "done" the Sistine Chapel in 20 minutes—she finds them enormously compelling and interesting: "I am delighted by their sense of responsibility and motivation, their openness to profound transformation and experience."

Joan Elias Gore, director of adult educational travel programs at the University of Virginia's School for Continuing and Professional Studies, oversees



the development of noncredit programs within the United States and beyond that are educationally enriching. Describing her participants as committed and passionate, she underscores the value of the work she does by saying, “While some people say travel is frivolous, it certainly is not. It is not expendable. We work in a global world and we can’t stop observing and learning.” In fact, the faculty she works with find that the participants on these programs will engage fully. “There is no question about their preparation. I know they will do the prereading because of their motivation. They are participating on these programs because they want to learn, not to earn a grade or fulfill a requirement.”

The experience of these educators underscores the potential learning that “nontraditional” learners can encounter on education abroad programs. They and others show us that—far from being uninterested in educational travel—adult learners are looking for opportunities to build study abroad into their college and university plans.

Just who are these adult learners and how might we develop programming to meet their needs?

■ In many of the programs designed for adults, the majority of students are 25 to 40 years old. But they can certainly be older; ranging from 25 to 95, they are not in a uniform place. They may be single or in a committed relationship; they may or may not have children, and those children may be young or adults themselves. They are not the millennial students we talk so much about!

■ They often come to school because of significant changes in their lives: a divorce (and changing priorities), children going on to college (increased free time and wanting to invest in themselves instead of their children), the death of parents (and rethinking who they are), or the need of a degree for a promotion.

■ Whatever their circumstances, it can be said that they bring a richer repertoire of life experiences to draw upon than the younger adults that we find most often in education abroad programs.

■ Students of psycho-social development tell us that they are moving beyond a search for identity and conformity so common in younger students, and are looking for or drawing upon larger principles or values, such as the desire to have an impact on future generations. They may be in a mid-life transition, trying to recast meaning in their lives.

■ While they have well-developed ways of understanding the world, they are often questioning these and are open to new interpretations, because of transitions they are experiencing.

■ As students, they are typically highly motivated. Often, this is tied to their life tasks (work, family). They want the travel-study experience to contribute to their lives in meaningful ways.

■ They have constraints in terms of time and money and family responsibilities.

What does this mean for advisers as we develop programs that include adults?

While many of the points below are not universal, the experiences education abroad leaders suggest are common.

■ Far from being “stuck in their routines,” many of these students can be very open to new ways of seeing the world; in fact, they may have joined a travel study course because they are seeking that. By and large, they know this is not a vacation—they have chosen this travel experience over other possibilities because they want to encounter the world in new ways.

■ They are often looking for greater meaning and seek experiences and learning that will help facilitate that growth. Whether they are 30 or 60, they may choose this experience as a way to take their lives in new directions. Perhaps they are at a point of feeling “unfulfilled” or bored. Maybe their work is not meeting their needs for contributing to the world. For these individuals, travel study is not so much a route to meet a requirement as it is a pathway to explore deep questions.

■ They often tie their experiences to their life tasks, such as parenting or working. How might the travel course help them in their work? What will they learn that they can bring back to their jobs? How might this experience affect the ways in which they raise their kids? How might it help with defining their life in a relevant and important way?

■ They often seek a break in the day-to-day demands of their lives. Being away can take them away (for a time) from those pressures. They are looking not only for a different rhythm, but for an experience that takes them out of their routines.

■ They have a limited amount of time free from the constraints of home, and they want to make the most of that time. They seek

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programs that will be worth the time and money because both are precious to them. Learners who sign up for these programs will not sleep in and miss opportunities; they will enjoy themselves but usually not to the point of excess. They will participate fully and eagerly.

■ As older individuals who have lived independently for years, they need a different balance of challenge and support. They do not want curfews, or to have their hand held; they have confronted difficult challenges before in their lives, but these may be new ones. It's tricky to know just how much freedom works for them.

■ The older they are, the more physical limitations might come into play.

While some international educators question the value of short-term programs (typically the only format that will work for these busy adults), Gore and McGury do not. They and their students have indeed experienced these programs as life changing and transformational. Students may change careers, as did a student of mine who moved from the for-profit to the nonprofit sector after expanding her worldview through a series of travel study programs. Another got in touch with her leadership skills when she traveled to a country where she spoke the language and brought that increased

self-confidence back to her professional life in Chicago. A third experienced a profound connection to the culture he encountered and ended up marrying a citizen of the host country. Countless others found that their assumptions and worldviews—developed over decades—no longer work; the meaning of race, money, or spirituality, for example, shifted profoundly—and so did their day-to-day lives.

Overlooking adults as education abroad participants is a serious shortcoming in the field. As advisers like McGury, Gore, and others have noted time and time again, these motivated and open individuals bring numerous gifts to the programs in which they participate, just as they reap valuable benefits from them. Certainly, the education abroad community at large must change the traditional assumptions of how to develop and facilitate these programs. The investment of time and energy is completely worthwhile. **IE**

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