

International Students Are an Emerging Market for Study Abroad

FOR RECENT UNIVERSITY OF SAN DIEGO (USD) GRADUATE LIV OLSEN, the decision to study abroad while attending USD was a natural choice. “I was already looking at what classes I could take abroad when I got accepted to USD, and going to Asia was one of my top priorities so that’s why I chose to go to Hong Kong.” The unique twist to this scenario is that Olsen was already studying abroad. As an international student from Norway, Olsen was one of the approximately 400 international students and scholars that study at USD each year.

The decision to “study abroad while studying abroad” is a choice that USD international students are making more often, a move that Olsen attributes to a more globalized international student population. “Many international students at USD have some sort of international experience before the university and they find it natural to continue to expand these travels.” For others like Saudi student Fahad Alessa, an additional education abroad experience represented a fleeting opportunity. “I thought I was ‘already studying in a foreign country’ and that traveling could be reserved for another time after school. But, I realized that after school I would probably get a job right away and would not have the luxury of traveling.”

Although the increase in international student participation in education abroad programs represents an encouraging trend on our campus, this positive outcome was not an intended one. In fact, until recently, our office had made no deliberate effort to track international student participation in education abroad programs or to market existing education abroad programs to international students. Despite the busy atmosphere in the International Center, staff from both the International Studies Abroad and International Student and Scholar sides of the office began to notice that international students seemed suddenly more interested in studying abroad. As we shared anecdotal evidence of this trend with each other (later confirmed by the data), we struggled to understand the reasons for the sharp increase in participation. Was this genuinely a sudden shift in interest from the international student community or were there previ-

ously obstacles in place that prevented these students from participating in education abroad programs?

Internationalization at USD

As with all trends, it is useful to revisit past history to help provide context to the story. The University of San Diego is a private, Catholic university located in central San Diego with an undergraduate population of just over 5,000 students. The campus internationalization initiative at USD began in earnest in 2003 with the arrival of a new president, Mary Lyons. Under Lyons’ leadership the university entered a time of self-reflection and future planning, and internationalization was identified as one of the university’s strategic directions. Next, an internationalization committee worked to consolidate the international efforts on campus. Prior to this, USD’s international initiatives were scattered throughout campus with two major offices, the Study Abroad Office and the International Student Office, physically located on opposite ends of campus. Historically, there was little to no collaboration between these two offices. To complicate matters further, there were two education abroad offices for undergraduate students—one in the College of Arts and Sciences and one in the School of Business Administration.

All of this changed, and changed rapidly, in the spring of 2007. Once the decision was made to consolidate programming at the undergraduate level, the process moved forward at light speed. Construction of the USD International Center began in May 2007. At that same time, the Office of International Studies Abroad and the Office of International Students and

In fact, until recently, our office had made no deliberate effort to track international student participation in education abroad programs or to market existing education abroad programs to international students.



Kartika Winata, an international student from Indonesia, is a student at the University of San Diego. She recently studied abroad for a semester in Oxford, England.

Scholars moved into a shared space in the middle of campus. The International Center officially opened for business in August 2007.

Working in Tandem

The shared space within the International Center strengthened the visibility of education abroad programs for both international and domestic students and, for the first time, allowed for combined advising between both sides of the office. These attributes were common themes revealed in our discussions with international students who participated in education abroad programs. “The fact that it was really easy to register for the program helped. Without [the integrated International Center], I would not have known about the study abroad program. Just passing by all the brochures and fliers from time to time, I was increasingly interested,” said Alessa.

In addition, the integrated International Center model allows both international and

domestic USD students access to creative, combined programming. For example, USD’s International Student Organization (which boasts an active membership of more than 100 students) deliberately recruits domestic students returning from education abroad programs. What results is a truly diverse and multicultural community where students mingle, learn from, and encourage each other to seek out meaningful international experiences. The International Buddy Program, which partners incoming exchange students with returning education abroad students, is another example of USD’s deliberate efforts to provide a context for international and domestic students to interact. “Participating in the Buddy Program has given me an outlet to reconnect to my study abroad experience by meeting international students who come from cultures I got to experience abroad,” explained Lissette Lizarraga, a domestic student matched with an exchange student from Morocco.

Perhaps the most important factor that facilitates international students’ interest in studying abroad is the access to co-advising in one convenient campus location, demystifying the idea of studying abroad and allowing them to seek advising on issues that are not likely to impact domestic students. Students may want to know, for example, if studying abroad will affect their immigration status. Or, if traveling to more than one country, will the international student need multiple visas? “The combined office helped me because I had to consult with more than one person especially with visa issues. It saved me a lot of time,” said Kartika Winata, an international student from Indonesia who is presently spending a semester in Oxford, England. Since university bureaucracy may deter an international student from choosing to study abroad, it is particularly helpful to be able to physically walk an international student from the International Student and Scholar area to meet an education abroad adviser, which would not

have been feasible when the two offices were on opposite sides of campus.

Since 2007, overall undergraduate participation in education abroad programs at USD has increased by almost 110 percent (from 403 students annually to 892 students). This drastic increase has culminated this year in USD ranking second in the nation for undergraduate education abroad participation according to *Open Doors 2009: Report on International Educational Exchange*. More than one half of the students who study abroad each year participate in USD’s short-term, faculty-led programs. These unique programs are the bread and butter of USD’s international offerings and also help to engage faculty in the campus internationalization initiative. Fortunately, the administration at USD is a strong proponent of international education and helps to substantially subsidize tuition costs for faculty-led programs, resulting in a great value for students. USD’s faculty-led programs (summer and intersession) represent attractive options for international students compared with semester-long programs and offer the additional advantage of automatic credit transfer.

Amanda Fernandez, an international student from the Philippines who studied in USD’s intersession program in Argentina, identifies the credit transfer process as the deciding factor in her decision to study abroad. “What I believe really helped me was the fact that I knew I would receive credit for the class, even if I took it abroad. I would not have the hassle of having to petition for the class to receive credit [at USD] since it was a program offered by the school. More importantly, the class was taught by a USD professor and I, therefore, guaranteed my dad that the class [would] not only be a fun experience, but the education I would be receiving would be of high-quality.”

Upon reviewing the international student education abroad data since the opening of the integrated International Center, we also noticed that several international student athletes enrolled in short-term programs, another trend that appears to be on the rise. Previously, student athletes (both international and domestic) were discouraged

from studying abroad because semester programs interfered with training and competition schedules. Now, however, with so many intersession and summer programs to choose from, student athletes can not only participate in these programs without disrupting their training schedules but can, in some cases, also pay for tuition costs using their athletic scholarship funds since many of the short-term program tuition costs are reduced. In other words, if a student athlete can take a course in Jamaica over the summer that costs less than a similar course on campus, why not take advantage of the opportunity to take the course abroad?

Moreover, the class schedule for short-term programs allows many international students to travel home for a portion of the winter (intersession) or summer breaks and, in many cases, then fly directly to the education abroad location. For example, an Italian international student could travel home immediately following final exams in December, spend two weeks at home in Italy and then fly directly to Barcelona for a faculty-led intersession program.

Lessons Learned

As we have examined the emerging trend of international students studying abroad at our institution, we have identified several

best practices as well as additional strategies we hope to employ in the near future. A review of the data as well as more qualitative and anecdotal evidence collected from our discussions with international students has demonstrated that the creation of USD's integrated International Center has been the single most important factor influencing international students to "study abroad while studying abroad." Deliberate connections between all global programs and events have made studying abroad an essential part of the USD experience for both domestic and international students.

The integrated International Center has created many unique opportunities for cross marketing programs to international students as well as domestic students who study abroad. For example, staff meetings are often combined and calendars are shared between offices to avoid competing events. In addition to cross marketing, the integrated model allows for each side of the office to draw on the strengths and expertise of the other. For example, the director of the Office of International Students and Scholars is often a keynote presenter on culture shock for the predeparture meetings required for education abroad students. In addition, International Studies Abroad staff often attend International Student Organization events

to mingle with international students and promote education abroad programs.

All of this contributes to a more international culture on USD's campus. For domestic students, this means that studying abroad is now the norm and forms part of their expected college experience. For international students, attending USD no longer requires putting international aspirations on hold. For both of these populations, our admissions office now markets USD's reputation for quality education abroad programs as a key point of difference between USD and other comparable universities.

Still, ongoing internationalization efforts have helped us to recognize strategies to increase international student involvement in education abroad. First, we plan to more deliberately market USD's education abroad programs to international students, with an emphasis on short-term programs. We predict that this targeted approach, highlighting the convenience and support international students will receive throughout the application process, will persuade even more international students to take classes abroad. In addition, we are making more deliberate mention of education abroad options during international freshman and transfer orientations and in our semi-monthly international student newsletter so that new students can begin planning an international experience from the onset of their time at USD.

Moving forward, the USD International Center is committed to providing students with the opportunity to cultivate a more globalized identity, an idea perhaps best summed up by Chinese international student Xixi Li, who spent a semester in Strasbourg, France: "Traveling, meeting new people, [and] challenging yourself is more than being away for a summer, a semester, or a year. It's a lifestyle, a constant state of being, a part of your identity you hold dearly onto." **IE**

GREG GRASSI, MSW, is assistant director of the Office of International Students and Scholars at the University of San Diego.

KIRA ESPIRITU, PhD, is director of international studies abroad at the University of San Diego.

We Care About Students
The Worldwide Student Insurance Specialist with The Personal Touch!

AIP | **ASSOCIATED INSURANCE PLANS INTERNATIONAL, INC.**

Custom Designed Insurance Programs to fit your specifications!
800.452.5772
www.AIPinternational.com