Career Booster—Education Abroad
Helping Students Translate the Value of Study Abroad to Their Job Search After Graduation

Participating in international education opportunities does not automatically translate into improved job prospects for graduates—even though many students describe their education abroad experience as a life-changing experience. While employers value the skills often associated with education abroad—such as teamwork, cultural awareness, and interpersonal skills—they do not always view study abroad as a useful way for potential employees to develop relevant skills. At the same time, recent graduates do not always have the understanding or the vocabulary to articulate how their education abroad experience translates to their future careers. To help combat this, many education abroad offices are increasingly making efforts to help study abroad returnees leverage their international experience in their job search, often in partnership with campus career services offices.

“We hear from so many of our study abroad alumni that this experience was life changing. Yet, they don’t speak about their experience in a way that conveys the skills they developed during their time abroad. There is a need to do this across all of our majors and areas of study, and not just for those areas where it may seem a bit more obvious. We hear from employers across many industry sectors that this experience is valuable, and so we are working to help our students do a better job of telling their stories,” says Becky Hall, director of career services administration at the Office for Student Affairs at the University of Minnesota (UM), Twin Cities.

Research supports these conclusions. A 2013 study from the British Council, for instance, reports that employers increasingly value employees who demonstrate the ability to understand different cultural contexts and viewpoints, show respect for others, and possess knowledge of a foreign language. But the relationship between these soft skills and education abroad is unclear, at least from the perspective of employers. According to a 2012 survey of employers done by the Collegiate Employment Research Institute (CERI) at Michigan State University (MSU), hiring managers considered study abroad to be of “limited importance” in relation to recruiting new graduates. In fact, study abroad was ranked the least important of several college activities, with internships listed the most valuable activity.

According to the CERI report, students are not able to adequately demonstrate the significant skills they have gained in study abroad and in other cocurricular activities, partially because employers do not always understand what study abroad entails: “Unlike internships that employers know a lot about, employers are generally unfamiliar with study abroad. It is not enough just to have the experience; students must be able to intelligently discuss how the experience has helped them develop skills they can bring to bear in a professional setting. If a student merely communicates that the study abroad was ‘totally awesome,’ employers assume the lowest common denominator of the study abroad experience—a great vacation with ample pub crawls. International educators, faculty, study-abroad staff, career services, and others must make a conscientious effort to help students learn to identify, articulate, and apply skills they learn in the experiential and co-curricular activities.”

In addition, international educators are increasingly facing pressure to explain the return on investment for study abroad experiences. According to Martin Tillman, president of Global Career Campus and former associate director of Career Services at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, globalization has resulted in the realignment of international programs towards helping students develop competencies that assistant them in
their future job searches. “The soaring cost of tuition, coupled with the strains placed on families during the recession, have led more campuses to re-examine how study abroad—in addition to its significant value as part of internationalization policy—brings added value to students’ career portfolios and provides substantial benefits in terms of their employability upon graduation,” he says.

“Companies want to provide students with skills and competencies that reflect their best practices, provide domain knowledge, and also introduce students to those cognitive, social, and personal skills that are a good fit with the company’s human resource needs. However, the evidence from recent research is that, from the perspective of employers, international experience, by itself, is not enough. In other words, campuses need to do more to assist students make the case that their international experience matters in ways that employers can relate to and understand,” explains Tillman, who is also the author of the recently published AIFS publication Campus Best Practices Supporting Education Abroad & Student Career Development.

Unpacking Career Benefits
Several institutions have already taken steps to address the gap between students’ education abroad experiences and their job searches. The University of Texas (UT) at Austin, for example, has developed a post-study abroad career workshop that helps students communicate their international experience in cover letters, resumes, and interviews. According to Curtiss Stevens, program coordinator in the international office, the workshops are based on behavior-based job screening techniques, which ask job candidates how they have handled specific situations and to describe what kinds of behaviors they used to solve problems.

For example, a potential employer might ask an interviewee to describe how he or she handled a difficult situation. A student who had studied abroad could share a story about a challenge he or she faced while abroad and describe how he or she solved it.
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In addition to pre- and post-study abroad career support, Colgate University’s Center for Career Services offers virtual career advising to students while they are abroad.

University of Minnesota is another institution that has taken steps to integrate career planning into its education abroad efforts through the Career Integration initiative as an extension of its Curriculum Integration initiative, which aims to embed study abroad into its degree programs and allow students to finish their academic programs on time. “With Career Integration, our focus is on helping students be more intentional about these experiences as they relate to career and graduate school planning,” Hall says.

She adds that throughout the Career Integration initiative, career services practitioners from across campus have served in a consultative role with the learning abroad center.

In addition, they have created a lot of print materials for staff who do individual advising with students during the planning and program selection process as well as re-entry workshops that are co-hosted by career services and learning abroad staff. “For some of our short courses or embedded courses, we have begun to weaving career planning into the curriculum,” Hall adds.

Seeing the Connections
Increased collaboration between career services and education abroad offices, as well as an increased focus on helping students articulate transferable skills, is helping some students draw on their study abroad experience during their job search process. Daniiel Leiner is an international business major studying at University of Texas at Austin and will soon be graduating. He studied abroad at Vienna University of Business and Economics in Austria. He
participating in a debriefing workshop when he returned, which helped him think about the transferable skills he gained from his international experience. “A good thoughtful session like that can highlight skills that students may not have had a chance to recognize while in the midst of their foreign adventure,” he says.

He is currently interviewing for jobs. “I am involved in a lot of interviews for post graduation positions and I am leveraging my experience in those interviews. I talk a lot about the problems and solutions of working within groups with cultural differences. I explain the coursework I did along with trips that pertain to their business or questions they ask. This usually leads to them asking if I know any foreign languages, which I do. Having all those experiences allows me to steer the conversation in the direction I want it to go in. This is ideal when trying to highlight specific skills,” he explains.

Leiner adds that talking about his study abroad experience has also helped him demonstrate his flexibility and adaptability as a potential employee. “Coming into a new environment and being completely uprooted also helped me gain a stronger sense of self and shows to employers my capability to do quality work when I am out of my element,” he says.

Similarly, Lisa Barsamian, a recent graduate of University of Texas, also found that studying abroad made her more willing to take risks in her job search. “Things like moving to a new state or taking a risk in a new field seemed less scary to me,” she explains.

Barsamian, currently an account executive at Yelp, says that many students have difficulty connecting their experiences abroad and finding a job “because they become nostalgic and look over the skills they gained during that time. … When thinking about finding a job, it’s hard to connect something that seems so much like a dream with the reality of your future. However, once students can find concrete examples of how it has changed them and how it will help them get to their goals, the connection becomes much more clear.”

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References


3 For more information about MSU’s unpacking workshops, see http://studyabroad.isp.msu.edu/research/Research/Gardner-Unpacking.pdf