

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 assist 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.



## Building Bridges Between Education Abroad and Career Services

**W**hile education abroad advisers and career services professionals may share the goal of helping students connect their educational experiences and activities with their future careers, they have different areas of expertise. By working together, education abroad offices and career centers can better assist students in leveraging their international experiences in their job search.

“At most institutions, you’ll find that the career services professionals are eager to help students make the connection between their education and future careers. Start with a simple invitation to meet a representative from the career center, and use this time to introduce them to your office and the needs of your students. They may know little about you and what you do, or the possible points of intersection between your offices,” says Vera Chapman, associate director of career development at the Center for Career Services at Colgate University.

She suggests that it is worth thinking about the goals of your administration and how your needs may fit within the strategic plan, for example if the school has identified global competency as an objective.

According to Martin Tillman, president of Global Career Campus, it may be up to the education abroad office to make the first move: “If the campus has a clearly articulated internationalization policy, it should be easier to make a case for ‘harmonizing’ the advising services to students. Too often, this process is fragmented and may occur only at one point in the students’ experience: perhaps in a predeparture orientation, or upon return to campus in a debriefing workshop or seminar.”

Becky Hall, director of career services administration at the Office for Student Affairs at the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities, suggests starting small. “Can you find a way to partner on a tip sheet or in developing a workshop? Build from there,” she says.

However, Brett Berquist, executive director of Michigan State University’s Office of Study Abroad, cautions that while collaboration often starts from individual connections, it’s important to formalize the partnership: “It’s a little dangerous if you don’t make it an office to office relationship. Otherwise, it only lasts as long as that individual relationship lasts.”

Stevens works closely with career services professionals at UT, which has 17 career service centers across its departments and colleges. He says it's easy to start small, by putting together a one-hour workshop or inviting in a career service professional to talk about transferable skills.

Similar to UT, the Office of Study Abroad at Michigan State University partners with career services to offer workshops where they focus on “unpacking” the study abroad experience. “We have a series of reentry debriefings that we do and take students through the whole process from ‘What was your experience like?’ to ‘Can we drill down into skill sets that matter to employers?’” says Brett Berquist, executive director of MSU’s Office of Study Abroad.

“Unpacking”—a concept developed by CERI director Philip Gardner, associate director of career services Linda Gross, and assistant director of study abroad, Inge Steglitz—aims to help students make critical connections between their learning experiences abroad in the context of preparing for their future careers, explore the ways it may have helped them develop academically, culturally, professionally, and personally, and articulate the skills and knowledge they developed through study abroad more effectively. MSU’s unpacking workshops first introduce the skills and competencies employers identify as particularly strong in recent hires who have had an international learning experience, and then give the participating students an overview of the various reflection exercises. One or more volunteers then take part in a mock interview about their international experience to model the unpacking process. Finally, students interview each other about their experiences, using guiding questions. By the end, students have a list of bullet points describing knowledge and skills gained that they can incorporate into a resume or a personal statement.<sup>3</sup>

“You see the light bulb go off. ‘Unpacking’ takes the students from the cushy, life-changing vocabulary to being able to describe specific skills they’ve obtained,” Berquist ex-

**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.**

plains, adding that a faculty member or staff will not debrief his or her own students.

Now that “unpacking” has become a well-established process on its campus, MSU is also starting to incorporate this focus into their pre-departure workshops. “We have come to the conclusion that the unpacking part is even more powerful if we apply it before or students go abroad. Instead of waiting until they’re back, we place some of those markers into the framework before they go, asking students to reflect in relation to their future life plans and what it could mean for their careers,” Berquist says.

Other institutions have also used the “unpacking” model to develop career-related workshops for study abroad students. The first is a predeparture session that focuses on ways to maximize the education abroad experience. “We discuss everything from creating a study abroad career plan to networking and international business etiquette. Our goal is to encourage students to be intentional while they are abroad, as students are often so enamored by the experience that they neglect to recognize or make use of the many opportunities for career development that are embedded in the study abroad experience,” says Vera Chapman, associate director of career development at the Center for Career Services at Colgate University.

Colgate also offers a second “unpacking” workshop based on Gardner’s model once students return from study abroad. “We use reflective prompts to help students make sense of their experiences and work to build connections to tangible skills gained. This often is a major ‘aha!’ moment for students, as they begin to understand how to communicate their experiences in ways that employers can understand—both in job application materials and during interviews,” Chapman explains.

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 cohosted 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. Danijel 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." **IE**

**CHARLOTTE WEST** is a freelance writer in Seattle, Washington. Her last article for *IE* was "English Expands" about the increase in English-taught degrees in Europe, which appeared in the annual intensive language supplement that was published with the March/April 2014 issue of *IE*.

#### REFERENCES

- 1 British Council (2013). Culture at Work: The value of intercultural skills in the workplace. Booz, Allen, Hamilton, McLean, VA. Page 3. <http://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/documents/culture-at-work-research.pdf>
- 2 Michigan State University. Recruiting Trends, 2011-2012. Career Services and the Collegiate Employment Research Institute (CERI). <http://www.ceri.msu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/FinalRecruiting-Trends-2011-2012.pdf>
- 3 For more information about MSU's unpacking workshops, see <http://studyabroad.isp.msu.edu/research/Research-Gardner-Unpacking.pdf>

**Learn Arabic**

Join thousands of students embracing the Arabic language and culture in the oldest civilization in the world, and at one of the longest established TAFL Institutes in the region. Apply now to the **Summer 2014 Study Abroad Language Programs:**  
**Arabic Total Immersion:** (7 or 14 weeks, 20 hrs/wk): US \$ 2800. Starting 8 Jun & 3 Aug, 14.  
**Intensive Islamic Studies:** (7 or 14 weeks, 20 hrs/wk) : US \$ 1100  
 Tailored programs for professionals, researchers and TAFL teachers.  
 Special rates for groups of 6 and above. [info@hedayetinstitute.com](mailto:info@hedayetinstitute.com)  
 10% discount for combined terms

**www.hedayetinstitute.com**  
 US: +1 646 216 8308 UK: +442033710141

**هداية**  
 HEDAYET INSTITUTE FOR ARABIC STUDIES  
 معهد هدایت للدراسات العربية