

The Right Tool for the Job

In an ever more globalized economy, educators need to assist students in building a sophisticated “toolkit” to market the value of their varied portfolio of international experiences to employers.

DO EMPLOYERS VALUE EDUCATION ABROAD EXPERIENCE? At first glance, the answer seems quite self-evident. How could they not? In a domestic economy that becomes more linked to overseas markets and investors each year, companies must be on the cutting edge of new technological developments; always looking for opportunities in emerging markets in the developing world; constantly assessing their workforce requirements to ensure that managers and workers understand the interrelated economic forces that impact their performance and the firms’ bottom line. Globalization is the most powerful economic factor influencing the job market in all regions of the world. Can we imagine the look of our global economy in 2025 and the skills and experience students will need, and employers will expect? What will the geopolitical landscape look like? Will students be interning and working in North Korea, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, or Cuba? Can we predict the industries and workforce needs that will emerge from the current political chaos in these regions?

Employers Do Value Education Abroad

In a report prepared by J. Walter Thompson Education for the Institute of International Education (IIE), the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), and the Australian Education Office, the company sought to determine employer acceptability and market value of an international degree among U.S. audiences—specifically students and employers. Its findings showed that “...employers’ most important selection criteria in recruiting a candidate are interpersonal skills, and when questioned employers believe that these skills are likely to be strong *in a candidate who has had an overseas education experience*. **The challenge really is to more effectively link and promote this connection...**[emphasis added]” (Thompson 2002).

In addition, the study reported that employers also found that candidates with international study experience possessed a wide range of skills desirable in their employees: these included, among others, cross-cultural communication skills, leadership, maturity, inde-

pendence, and cultural awareness. While this finding would likely warm the heart of any international educator, one of the ironies of the research is that only 3 percent of students surveyed stated that they expressly chose to study overseas because they believed that employers see those with some sort of overseas experience as more employable! This points to a key issue, if not a vexing conflict, for the field: Should students be encouraged to go abroad for altruistic reasons—i.e. to widen their world view and experience another culture (a goal cited by 60 percent of students in the Thompson study)? Or should their decision to participate in education abroad experiences be linked more directly to future career goals and professional aspirations? Are these two points of view fundamentally incompatible, or are there opportunities before students depart, and after they return to campus, to integrate their international experiences with both their career goals and the hiring criteria of employers?

In my experience with graduate students studying international relations at The Johns Hopkins School

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of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), surveys of both students and employers (nonprofit, profit, public, and in international organizations) have left little doubt that students who enter SAIS with at least two to four years of prior professional experience are likely to have greater success in their job searches. The practical benefits of education and work abroad, internships, multilingual language competency, and the understanding of world issues gained from first-hand cross-cultural experience—especially in nonwestern states—is unquestionable. The need to link education and work abroad experience to career decision-making is also made more obvious given the finding that at least 90 percent of admitted students are making career transitions—for example, from the public to the nonprofit sector.

The career services staff develops proactive action plans to assist students with the necessary self-assessment, research, and networking tasks they will need to realize their career goals after graduation. This includes reediting résumés to fit new “career stories,” identifying internships that will add value to their skill sets, assisting in self-assessment to clarify values and skills, and reviewing how students will “pitch” their past professional accomplishments to make a strong case to a new employer. Whether or not an undergraduate, at age 19, chooses to view his or her decision to intern, study, or work abroad in the context of their future prospects for landing a job (and there is ample evidence that students at community colleges must do exactly this), the time will inevitably come when this is the challenge a student will face. The global marketplace will see to it.

New Skills and New Challenges in the Global Workforce

We are not only talking about large businesses or multinational corporations being impacted by what’s been referred to as the “new economy” and a changing global political and economic landscape. Students leaving colleges and universities with either AA, BA, MA, MS, MBA, or doctoral de-

grees all face a job market—whether in the nonprofit, public, or private sectors—that is decidedly different than a generation ago. And the marketplace demands increased adaptability, cross-cultural sensitivity, political awareness, and intellectual flexibility.

For example, workers for nongovernmental organizations engaged in humanitarian relief work in Sudan or Iraq must learn how to manage volatile security threats on the ground. Their work may be compromised by their need to rely on UN or national security forces to do their work. The U.S. Agency for International Development has a new Global Development Alliance that seeks to leverage the resources of the private sector to support development in the developing world. The Millennium Challenge Corporation (a new U.S. government body set up in 2004) is looking for staff with prior private sector business background to join its efforts to devise “compacts” with governments in selected emerging developing economies to meet their national development priorities. MBA schools have developed new curricula offerings to train students in international development as well as the hot field of Corporate Social Responsibility. Teachers must manage classrooms where

a majority of students are nonnative-born and more than 100 languages may be spoken throughout the school. The list goes on and on. And for every story about the changing U.S. workplace, there are others in emerging regional market powers like China, India, Indonesia, Taiwan, or Singapore (as Thomas Friedman cites in his new book, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*). Globalization’s impact on workers and the workplace has leaped across national borders and transcends cultures.

Partnerships Between Businesses and Educational Institutions

In a provocative essay, Michael Woolf discusses the close and symbiotic relationship between universities and the business community (Woolf 2004). Citing the increased acceptance of the value of education abroad by both educators and business leaders, Woolf highlights the blurring of lines between the two sectors and a narrowing of the gap (for better and for worse, I would argue) between corporate interests and academic priorities. He describes how in the United Kingdom, business studies, especially MBA degree programs, have wildly

expanded—from just two MBA programs in 1967, to 120 in 1997. And he describes how large companies are increasingly taking on the educative role of a university by expanding employee training programs (from 400 to 1600 since 1988). Evidence to support this is found in recent remarks by the chairman and CEO of GE, Jeff Immelt, at a dinner marking the 85th anniversary of the founding of IIE: “...this is a company [with 300,000 employees, half of whom live outside the United States] that spends \$1 billion each year to train our employees” (IIE 2005).

NAFSA itself added global workforce development to its mission statement several years ago, in recognition of the importance both educators and business leaders attach to the education and training of U.S. and international students.

Global political and economic forces are reshaping, if not adding a new dimension to, the fundamental rationale for education abroad. Businesses—along with the

federal government (particularly in light of post-September 11 focus on global security threats)—are taking a more active interest than ever before in the outcomes of education abroad experiences as they struggle to build a sophisticated and informed workforce. Whether it is the defense/intelligence community looking for analysts who speak Arabic and have experience in the Middle East, companies who are monitoring and assessing political risk for their clients, or Bill Gates who cannot hire enough Americans with computer technology skills (and therefore seeks to raise the quota so he can hire more foreigners with H-1B visas), there is a growing and important “economic development” rationale for widening opportunities for education abroad. Carol Conway cites four reasons to support this rationale: facilitating export development, paving the way for innovation, a better understanding of immigrants in the workforce, and reducing the gap between haves and have-nots in American society (Conway 2004). In each

instance, Conway explains how the synergy of global and local interests, need for understanding, awareness, and cultural sensitivity, and expansion of opportunity for global careers to minorities—are all drivers for expanded linkages between the economic and national security benefits of education abroad.

Nancy Arthur at the University of Calgary adds a cautionary note to the internationalization of the marketplace and our universities. She states, “[internationalization] must be tempered with social and ethical considerations...If the 1990s can be described as the century of technological advances, this century will be a time to examine the impact of globalization on people’s lives...Globally minded employees of the future are needed who see beyond economic gain and see the importance of considering human and ecological costs” (Arthur 2000).

Marketing Education Abroad Experience to Employers

Numerous essays have recently appeared in *International Educator (IE)* extolling the virtues and global competencies learned through both long and short-term education abroad experiences (see Winter and Spring 2004 *IE* issues). There is, in fact, a growing body of new empirical research validating the long-standing anecdotal reporting of the positive outcomes of education abroad experiences. As Adler and her colleagues at San Diego State University write in a newly published essay (Adler et al. 2005), “New research is now informing those institutions intent on assessing the effectiveness of their campus internationalization efforts, and it is helping international educators learn not only what to evaluate, but more importantly, how to evaluate their success in preparing students for the global workforce.”

Such empirical, evidence coupled with the pressure of preparing students to enter the workforce and effectively compete in a global economy, have turned around administrative resistance to “internationalize,” as campuses realize that to do otherwise handicaps students in realizing their career

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goals and succeeding in their job searches.

While employers believe job applicants with education abroad experiences are most likely to possess the skill sets they seek in their employees, they do not value education abroad—or related international experiences—for its own sake. Employers are, however, actively interested in whether or not a job applicant demonstrates that as a result of their experiences abroad, they have developed the requisite skills and sensitivity that makes them stand out as the strongest candidate for a particular job.

Thus, the challenge facing students is to successfully translate what they learned abroad into accomplishment statements on their resumes, and to effectively articulate and clearly describe these skills during their job interviews. Students must build a sophisticated “toolkit” to market the value of their varied portfolio of international experiences to employers (Matherly 2005).

The capability to interpret the value of an education abroad experience to an employer is made easier if a students’ decision to go abroad is linked to their career goals. The challenge to education abroad advisers and career service professionals on campuses is whether or not they act proactively to assist students to take full advantage of their overseas sojourns. This requires the concerted collaboration of faculty, career staff, and study abroad advisers prior to the start of the overseas sojourn.

Efforts to develop innovative campus programs and institute new collaborative administrative relationships between offices of career services and study abroad advising can be found across the United States. In a new volume I recently edited for the American Institute for Foreign Study Foundation (Tillman 2005), authors described numerous examples on campuses; among them are these:

- The annual University of Michigan International Opportunities Fair brings together 500 students, 40 organizations and diverse administrative units across campus.
- The University of Minnesota Career Development Network unites 17 distinct career offices and the Learning Abroad Center to coordinate and share information regarding the application of career development practices to study abroad advising.
- The Boston College Global Proficiency Program seeks to integrate academic, co-curricula, and study abroad experiences to give students a more cohesive focus and document—on student transcripts—their international accomplishments.

At the end of the day, it is up to students to make the case and demonstrate the link between their international experiences and the specific skills valued by the companies or organizations whom they want to work for. This task is made easier if study abroad advisers and career services staff work together to highlight the synergy of a carefully thought through decision-making process linking the choice of an education abroad program to the students’ near-term career goals.

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