



## QUALITY AND COST IN EDUCATION

# BALANCING

WITH ENROLLMENT IN EDUCATION ABROAD programs at record numbers, colleges and universities continue to add new programs to meet the demands of students, faculty and institutional administrators. At the same time, they face a delicate balance between filling the programs with enough students to sustain them while maintaining or even trying to improve program quality.

One issue is how to measure quality. Meeting requirements for academic credit on the home campus usually is a basic standard but often that is not enough, study abroad officers say.

The number of U.S. students studying abroad for academic credit increased by 9.6 percent in 2003–04 to a record 191,321, according to the *Open Doors Report 2005: International Students in the United States*, the

annual report on international education published by the Institute of International Education. Although there is no central data source on the number of education abroad programs, educators expect the growth to continue in the years ahead.

“There is a demand to offer new programs. The institutional market and the student market are calling for them,” says David Larsen, director of Arcadia University’s Center for Education Abroad.

On the institutional side, the push for new programs comes from senior administrators and faculty. Colleges and universities in the United States and those with which they affiliate abroad tie enrollments “to revenue, to success, and they want that to continue to grow,” Larsen says.

Students, meanwhile, want to travel in larger numbers to familiar locations, mostly in Western Europe,

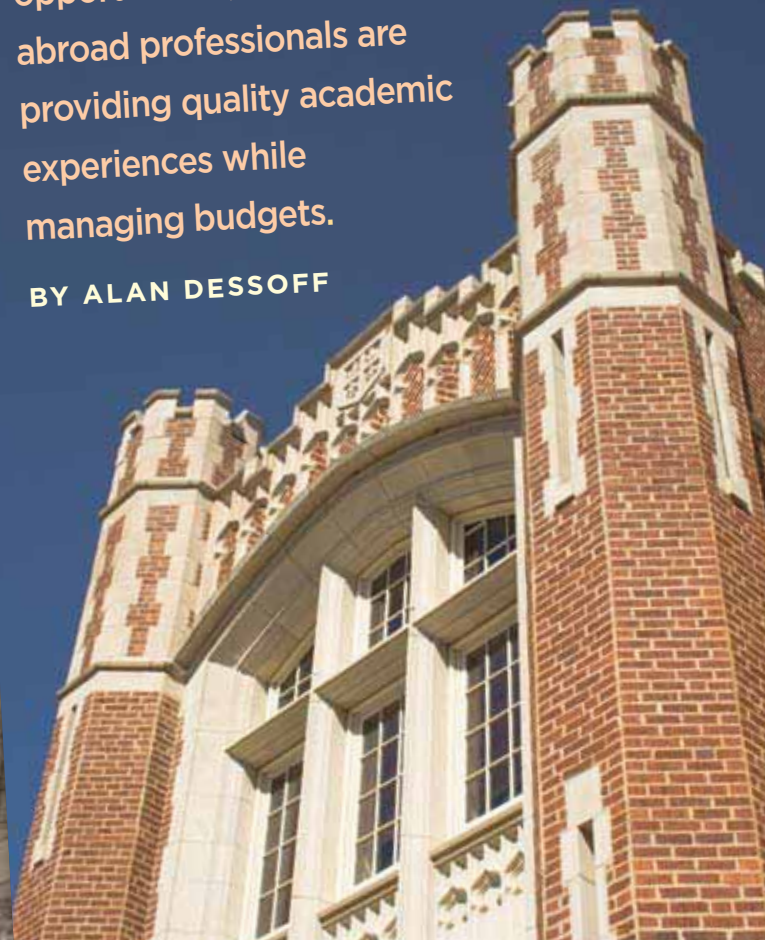




# ABROAD: NG T

With soaring demand for more overseas opportunities, education abroad professionals are providing quality academic experiences while managing budgets.

BY ALAN DESSOFF



and also to some places that are unfamiliar in Africa, Asia and parts of the developing world, Larsen says.

"We're seeing a lot of interest in South Africa. We don't have a program there so we need to take a look at it," says Patricia C. Martin, senior overseas program manager in the Office of International Programs at the University of Pennsylvania. More than 600 undergraduates take part annually in semester or academic year study abroad, choosing from more than 100 programs that Penn recognizes for academic credit, Martin reports.

At Boston University, "there is a huge general increase in demand for study abroad from both students and different segments of the university. In addition to our own students, we get others from all over the country," adds Joseph Finkhouse, director of institutional relations in BU's Division of International Programs.

BU offers more than 60 programs in 17 countries and up to 1,500 students participate annually, representing 35 percent of undergraduates who receive degrees. The number was about 22 percent five years ago, Finkhouse says.

"One of the ways we have been growing is to broaden opportunities for students who traditionally have not been well-served by study abroad. We try to make new programming conform better to the landscape of the university," Finkhouse continues.

For example, his division worked closely with BU's College of Engineering to develop a program in Germany for engineering students. There also are opportunities for students interested in narrow areas of the visual and performing arts, including fine arts, acting, music, film and television "and things like that," Finkhouse says.

## Financial Factors

At many colleges and universities, budgets play an important part in determining how far study abroad officers can go in establishing new programs. That often means that programs must reach minimum enrollment levels so that they at least break even financially.

Programs operated through the Kalamazoo College Center for International Programs get no support from the college's general fund. "We are self-funded, so I have to pay careful attention to the bottom line," says Joseph L. Brockington, associate provost for international programs. Up to 250 students out of a student body of 1,200 study abroad in a given year, he reports.

Most programs must have at least five students to cover costs but there are exceptions, when "we decide to just go ahead and bite the bullet and run it at a loss," Brockington says. "I don't have to balance each line. I just have to balance the bottom line," he explains.

Education abroad also is self-supporting at Howard Community College in Maryland, which requires at least 10 students to support a program, including the cost of a faculty member from Howard and airfare—a key component. "If we don't get 10 but we have students and a faculty member who want to go so badly, we usually sharpen our pencils and see if we can make it happen," says George Barlos, director of international education. "If we're lucky, we can get good flights. Or we work with the host institution or vendors of services and ask them to lower their prices. If it works out and the money coming in will pay for it, then we'll go with it."

Howard was one of five U.S. higher education institutions that were awarded the distinguished Senator Paul Simon Award for Campus Internationalization last year (see "Educating Citizens of the World," in the March/April 2006 issue of *IE*).

Some programs are more expensive to operate than others so each has its break-even point, says Kathleen Sideli, associate dean for international programs at Indiana University-Bloomington. She canceled "a promising, exciting" program on the history of African-Americans in the arts in Paris when only three students signed up. "We can't run a program with just three students," she says. Some programs might require up to a dozen students, she states.

Administrators at Penn have other concerns when only a handful of students sign up for a program. "We worry about what the experience is like for just four or five U.S. students to be in classrooms with each other. We're not just talking about money. We're talking about the quality of the overall experience for the students," says Martin.

Penn sometimes juggles its schedule to offer a program in just one semester instead of two so that enough students enroll to make it worthwhile, Martin says.

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Arcadia makes money from its programs and the surpluses after expenses become part of the university's endowment, Larsen says. He insists that there is "no direct pressure" to send more students abroad but acknowledges that by sending large numbers of students overseas every year, "the reputation of the university grows, and that's a good thing."

He acknowledges that "if you can't attract students to a program, no matter how good it is, you can't sustain it." But he is reluctant to shut down a program just for that reason. "I'm Danish by heritage. That means I'm very stubborn," he says.

He cites a program that Arcadia has operated in Athens for 15 years. "I have run it with as few as eight students for a semester. Anybody looking at it objectively would say I should shut that program down because it's losing money and not worth it," Larsen says.

"I was determined that we would make it succeed. We just kept on doing what we were doing. We were able to spread the word about the quality of the program and now the enrollments are averaging about 40 a semester." He concedes that the Athens experience was "a rare case."

Howard Community College is working hard to build student interest in a program it offers in Turkey. "If they knew what I know, they would jump at the chance. It's an amazing opportunity," says Barlos. Through classroom presentations, Barlos and the faculty



member who would teach the program finally got enough students—four. That's all they needed because Howard worked out an arrangement with two other community colleges that also agreed to provide four students apiece to make the program work.

Barlos suspects that perhaps Turkey was "a little too exotic" for students who are more attracted to countries like Italy and the perceived "fun factor" they offer. In Italy, Howard is developing a new multi-disciplinary program with a host institution in Siena. The program will include language study and students will live with host families. While they will take excursions, there will be less emphasis on travel and sightseeing, Barlos says.

BU doesn't necessarily cut a program that doesn't make money but "if it goes on for a long time, we have to look at it," says Finkhouse. "It's not just a question of breaking even financially. It's also being able to sustain the critical mass in the program that allows us to have the kinds of classes and other activities that we want."

With new programs in particular, "we understand that we have to carry them for a while until they find their legs," Finkhouse says. But money, he concedes, is a factor. BU mounts "a very big marketing and recruiting effort" to try to build enrollment for its programs but shuts them down if they fail to draw enough students, Finkhouse says.

That happened to an internship program that BU offered for many years in Moscow. "It was a great program. Students had wonderful classes, great internships and all kinds of incredible cultural opportunities," Finkhouse says.

Perhaps consistent with a shift in global interests, interest in the Moscow program waned. "There are not a lot of programs in Russia now. A lot of them are closing down because students are not studying Russian like they used to," Finkhouse says.

The BU program also was expensive to operate and "we just couldn't attract enough students every semester to keep it financially viable. Despite great efforts in recruiting and advertising, we were always coming up short," Finkhouse says.

"There was a heartfelt discussion in our office about what we could do best for our students, and we had to remind ourselves that we can't do everything for everybody," Finkhouse states.

## Meeting Quality Standards

Popular programs that are easier to fill face a different kind of scrutiny. As increasing

numbers of U.S. students want to study abroad, questions arise about whether the programs that attract them meet institutional expectations for academic quality, including the qualifications of the individuals who teach them. There also are questions about the qualifications of the students.

"We constantly ask ourselves whether we are expecting the same level of work by students overseas that we would expect on their home campuses. That is the litmus test for us," says Larsen.

"When I look at a program for quality," adds Brockington, "I ask, are the academics defensible back here? Is the learning at least on a par with what students would learn on-campus at home?"

"We sometimes have circumstances where we offer popular programs and when we take a look at them, the academic challenge is not there," says Larsen. In those cases, he works with the faculty or program directors "to make them aware of the standards we expect them to meet." If programs do not improve, Arcadia ends them. "I have closed programs because we've been unable to deliver the kind of quality we expect," Larsen says.

At Indiana, "all of our programs are under a quality control mechanism," says Sideli. A faculty committee evaluates every proposed program and approves only those worthy of academic credit

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from Indiana whether they are provided by Indiana or other providers. Approved programs are reviewed annually.

Sometimes, if a program “doesn’t look appropriate for credit,” Indiana suggests that it be offered instead as a non-credit “cultural trip,” Sideli says. That doesn’t happen often, but even non-credit programs must go through her office, she says.

Other factors, like safety, also can impact program approvals. Indiana was running a program in Haiti but “it became a place not to send students,” Sideli says. So Indiana ended it and students went to Ecuador instead.

“We like to think that our programs are of high quality. We look at them with the same standards of rigor as the courses that are being taught on campus,” says Finkhouse at BU.

Similarly, at Penn, faculty in the appropriate academic departments review the syllabi and instructors of all courses that students take abroad for credit. “There is a high level of oversight. It’s more than whether there are enough hours for credit,” says Martin.

Like many other institutions, BU usually hires faculty in host countries instead of sending its own faculty to teach abroad. But

**It’s about quality of relationships, not just academics. We are very clear with parents that it’s more than an academic program and students will be doing more than just sitting in class. It will affect the whole person, as it should.”**

each program site has a resident director, a BU employee. Some directors are tenured members of academic departments on campus who have been living abroad for a while. “They are highly qualified people,” Finkhouse says.

The site directors identify potential faculty and help develop courses. The course syllabus and CV of a proposed faculty member go to the curriculum committee of the appropriate department on campus, then to the college curriculum committee, then to the provost. “It is the same procedure that new courses or faculty members have to go through here in Boston,” Finkhouse says. Once on board, the foreign instructors are considered adjunct BU faculty.

He cites the new engineering program that BU offered first in Germany and now has extended to Mexico. BU engages faculty in the host countries to teach to the specifications of the College of En-

gineering in Boston, “so the labs and courses are the functional equivalents of what would be taught here on campus,” Finkhouse says.

Still, he continues, “we’re intent on doing that in a way that students are not just doing in Germany what they would be doing in Boston.” So while their German instructors might teach in English, BU requires its students to study German while they are in the country and also take a course relating technology and culture in Germany.

“We want to be very much about ‘place.’ We consider that to be a fundamental part of the quality of a program overseas,” Finkhouse says.

A vital key to a program’s academic quality is hiring high-quality faculty in a host country who understand what the students’ home institutions expect of them, says Larsen. “If they don’t understand, you either don’t hire them or you have to train them to teach for you,” he says.

“There are plenty of people out in the world who want to teach and teach well.

Training them is a challenge, because you’re frequently dealing with people who were trained in different systems to work

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with students in different ways from what we do in the U.S.," Larsen says.

Arcadia tries to achieve a balance between the host country's educational practices and U.S. methods. "We don't want to send students overseas to do exactly what they do in the U.S., but we also don't want to send them into a system they are not prepared for or that is not prepared for them. It just sets them up for failure," Larsen declares.

At Howard Community College, the college's own faculty members accompany students abroad and teach the programs. "The academic content is very important to us and we work with faculty on that before they leave," says Barlos. He also tries to visit all program sites to ensure that host institutions can provide "stability and services" to students and faculty. "That isn't always the case," Barlos says.

## More than Academics

Brockington maintains that the quality of programs should mean more for students than just taking classes on a foreign campus. "My definition of quality goes way beyond academics," says Brockington. "If the only reason we're sending these young people abroad is to take classes, we might as well forget it. We have missed the boat. They can take classes here at home and everybody can save a lot of money."

"There has to be attention to what happens outside the classroom—students' intercultural growth and development and their whole student life and development. It's about quality of relationships, not just academics. We are very clear with parents that it's more than an academic program and students will be doing more than just sitting in class. It will affect the whole person, as it should."

Sometimes that makes parents uncomfortable but "it's something they need to know, because we know they will be on the phone to us if their offspring are uncomfortable," Brockington adds.

At BU, says Finkhouse, "we've been working really hard not just to provide programs for the sake of having programs but also to have them conform to the things that are so important in study abroad, like cultural immersion. One thing we don't want to do is replicate the Boston experience in foreign locations. We believe strongly that study abroad should be, in a significant way, about the places where students are." Similarly, at Penn, "we're looking for as high a level of integration as possible," says Martin. A high-quality program means, she explains, that students study in the language of their host country, which most Penn students do in overseas programs, and also live with host students or families. They also explore the host culture through involvement in service programs, volunteer internships, and other activities.

Another quality factor in study abroad programs is the quality of the students who participate in them. For the most part, institutions require students to achieve defined academic levels before being allowed to enroll in foreign programs.

"Not just anyone can go. They have to be in good standing with a certain number of credits completed," says Barlos.

Indiana spells out its eligibility requirements on its Web site. To apply to a program that Indiana runs itself, students need a cumulative grade point average (GPA) of 2.75 to 3.0. The university acknowledges, however, that while certain programs are rigid in adhering to the GPA requirement, others consider students whose GPAs "approximately" meet the requirement.

Although there are exceptions, the norm for semester and academic year programs at Indiana is for students to complete two full years of on-campus study before going abroad. Faculty committees screen applications, which usually include a transcript, recommendation letters from instructors, and a student's personal statement. Students also are interviewed for most programs. Committees recommend students who not only meet the minimum eligibility criteria but also show "the type of intellectual curiosity, personal maturity, academic rationale and social flexibility necessary for a successful study abroad experience," the university explains on its Web site.

"A student who is not ready for the experience either academically, emotionally or in terms of maturity could end up being a problem for the rest of the students," says Sideli. "We would rather cancel a program, or allow a program to go with one student less and lose some money, than send the wrong student and make some money."

## Other Providers

Many education abroad offices help students who want to enroll in programs offered through other schools or providers. Indiana offers more than 40 programs of its own and about as many more through other providers, reports Sideli. Of 1,500 study abroad students, about 350 choose non-Indiana providers.

## **“It’s like the chicken and the egg. Do you wait for student interest to develop a program? Or do you develop programs based on where your faculty would like students to have opportunities?”**

At BU, the international programs division helps students who enroll in other programs take a leave of absence from the university, then transfer back in with the credits they have earned. About 200 of the 1,500 students who go abroad do it through non-BU programs, Finkhouse says.

“We try to be open-minded about this. We have always functioned in a kind of courtesy role for them as opposed to a formal advising role, and beyond that, students have been pretty much on their own,” Finkhouse says.

But the arrangement has raised “a lot of issues,” he says. “They are going all over the world and we do not consider all the programs that they do to be of adequate academic quality in terms of earning BU credits,” he says. There also are concerns about BU’s ability to keep track of its students and provide services that they need while they are abroad, he adds.

Now, BU is becoming more directly involved with students who want to study through non-BU programs. For the first time, it is hiring a staff member to create a policy for non-BU study abroad options, including a review and approval process. The new staffer also will advise students. “We’re going to try to work one-on-one with students to find the best programs for them,” Finkhouse says.

At Indiana, programs offered through other providers go through the same approval process as the university’s own programs. Approval is based on faculty review of the coursework and the dossiers of foreign instructors, whether the curriculum of a program correlates with the requirements of academic majors at Indiana, and “whether we have student demand in that part of the world,” Sideli says.

Kalamazoo rarely sends its students abroad through programs offered by other schools or providers and “when we do, we make site visits. We want to know the people who are receiving our students,” says Brockington. The site visits are the same as Kalamazoo staffers make for the college’s own programs, he says.

For a program in Chile, Kalamazoo maintains a relationship with the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE). “We had a big enrollment and needed to expand capacity. We decided this would be the best way we could do it for the least amount of money,” Brockington says. To ensure the quality of the program and its instructors, he sent his associate director to Chile and went there himself the next year “because we want to know who is minding the store,” Brockington says.

### **New Challenges**

Educators agree that the numbers of study abroad programs and students participating in them probably will continue to increase and will present new challenges. One, suggests Martin, is developing in some popular European cities that draw high concentrations of U.S. students.

“How can you integrate them in the host culture when there are so many other Americans around?” she asks.

But it’s also a challenge, she says, to encourage students to go “beyond doing the comfortable thing” and travel to less traditional locations. One problem, Martin says, is that international educators in the U.S. might not be qualified themselves to develop programs in certain locations.

“It takes time to develop that expertise,” says Martin. “So it’s not just students who need to be introduced to these opportunities. Colleges and universities have to invest in the training and experiences that faculty and staff need to develop the opportunities. If you don’t change the perspectives of the people organizing the programs, the programs won’t change.”

Martin says she is a big believer that “if you build it, they will come; if you provide a good opportunity, students will consider it.” She cites a successful program that Penn developed in Senegal with “a lot of faculty support and encouragement” and in a consortium with nearby Bryn Mawr, Haverford and Swarthmore colleges. There was no problem getting students to sign up.

However, Martin says, “it’s like the chicken and the egg. Do you wait for student interest to develop a program? Or do you develop programs based on where your faculty would like students to have opportunities?”

Brockington sees a time coming when costs and other factors will force more schools to collaborate on programs, as some already are doing, instead of offering only their own. “It’s getting very expensive to offer a high-quality program with low enrollment,” he says. “If I have one, the college down the street has one and another institution nearby has one and we each have three students, we ought to talk to each other about how we can get all nine students in the same place, doing it the same way. We still would be able to say that we have our own program and our own relationship with the host institution.”

Achieving collaboration like that might be easier said than done because of “institutional pride” by colleges and universities in maintaining programs that are strictly their own, Brockington says. But “it’s one of the things that is really going to have to be decided in the next 10 years.”

**IE**

**ALAN DESOFF** is an independent journalist in Bethesda, Maryland. His most recent article for *IE*—“Who’s NOT Studying Abroad?”—dealt with underrepresented populations in education abroad and ran in the March/April 2006 issue.