

The Career Value of Education Abroad

IN 2007 MORE THAN 200,000 STUDENTS WILL STUDY ABROAD. Spending academic time away from the “home institution” increasingly represents a right of passage—so much so that in some colleges like Colby, Dickinson, and St. Olaf, more than 80 percent of students leave the United States for at least a semester. The question for many sophomores—particularly in predominantly liberal arts colleges and universities—is not whether they’ll be having an international experience, but where.

What’s behind the burgeoning interest? Student essays tell of multiple aspirations: educational opportunity, the ability to gain a different perspective, cross-cultural understanding, foreign travel, desire to learn a language, or interest in studying a particular subject. The list goes on. But more often than not, students also have in the back of their mind that education abroad will give them a career advantage.

Many study abroad offices actively promote the career benefits of an international education. Unfortunately, these benefits do not happen simply by getting on a plane and landing in a different country. Students have to work for them.

Putting study abroad on a resume will usually attract an employer’s attention. But only an interview will determine whether the employer sees the student’s experience as a career boost or a career bust.

The Employer’s Point of View

Ask the CEO of any large company about the future, and he or she is likely to talk about globalization and the need to understand other languages and cultures. This belief is widely shared by the nonprofit and government sectors. The State Department advertises its need for foreign service officers who are “diverse, culturally aware, adaptable, well-rounded, agile, and strategic-thinking problem solvers.” The Department of Defense announced a major initiative to develop foreign language and cultural expertise among its military and civilian members in March 2006. And as Thomas L. Friedman says in his book *The World is Flat*, “Every young American today would be wise to

think of himself or herself as competing against every young Chinese, Indian, or Brazilian.”

This is where many university officials make a leap of faith. The argument goes like this: if business, government, and nonprofit organizations all require large additional numbers of graduates with language skills and cultural understanding, it’s a no-brainer to try to increase the numbers of students studying abroad. Unfortunately, too few students study abroad in places where they are likely to gain the language skills most in demand, such as Arabic, Chinese, or Russian. And many students are not willing to get sufficiently out of their “comfort zones” to truly engage and communicate with the people of the country where they are studying. Learning foreign languages is hard and requires going through a period where it’s all too obvious how little you know!

The fact is, education abroad does not inherently endow a career advantage. It is only perceived as advantageous when the student is able to articulate how she has used that experience to obtain the knowledge, skills, and abilities required by the employer. The student who sees studying abroad as an enjoyable “time out” from school—an attitude all too prevalent on today’s college campuses—will be out of luck.

KNOWLEDGE: Specific job knowledge is difficult to demonstrate through study abroad, unless the open position requires knowledge of a particular country. However, all organizations can benefit from candidates with a global perspective—something that students can easily obtain by observing and reflecting on what goes on around them. The truly career-savvy



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student will find a way to combine study abroad with an internship, or work in the country where he or she is studying abroad. This kind of experience can provide the all-important “hook” that sets a student apart from other applicants.

SKILLS: According to a 2007 employer survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), employers of new graduates seek the following:

- Verbal and written communication skills
- Interpersonal skills
- Teamwork skills
- Computer skills
- Analytical skills

Students can, of course, develop these skills through any educational program, home or abroad. But planning a group field trip from Paris to Mont St. Michel, for example, can illustrate a degree of complexity in teamwork that goes well beyond doing a joint lab project at college.

It is interesting that employers do not highly rank the need for cross-cultural competency or linguistic ability—two skills that can be acquired through study abroad. While these skills may not be necessary for most entry-level postgraduate positions, they will become increasingly important in the more global work world of the future. Students who have gained fluency in

a language, particular a difficult language, will likely be most in demand. They have demonstrated a capacity to learn that is very attractive to organizations, and their success in one language predicts the ability to pick up a new language. Those who have built their fluency by engaging with a local population while studying abroad have usually also developed a higher degree of another skill: cross-cultural competence.

ABILITIES: Employers are looking for personal attributes or characteristics that will make students effective employees. The same survey cited above rates the following attributes as most desirable:

- Honesty/integrity
- Motivation
- Initiative
- Strong work ethic
- Flexibility/adaptability
- Detail oriented

Few students are able to effectively demonstrate these attributes on a resume. But a student who has studied abroad in a thoughtful way will find copious examples of motivation, initiative, and—particularly—flexibility and adaptability.

Approaching Study Abroad with the Right Attitude

Millennial students—those born after 1982, according to authors Neil Howe and William Strauss—have often grown up overprogrammed and overprotected. Those attending highly selective schools are even more likely than their peers to have sought out opportunities to excel, in and out of the classroom, from an early age. These students are highly accomplished in many areas. But that accomplishment has often come at a price: they have been protected from risk and failure and the opportunity to create their own paths to success. Education abroad can offer a rich, yet structured, environment for students to learn these essential life skills—if they are willing to take advantage of them.



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Parents have a particular role to play in helping students make the most of study abroad since they are the resource most frequently consulted by students. If parents are truly acting in their child's best interest, they will encourage him or her to use study abroad as a way to get out of their comfort zone, to explore, to build friendships with people unlike themselves. When parents put parameters around where they want their sons and daughters to study ("I don't want to visit you in Africa," for example), and don't allow students to make and learn from mistakes, they do their children an injustice.

It is encouraging to see that many millennial students do recognize the opportunities in studying abroad to develop a different sense of self and to separate, literally and figuratively, from their past lives. Disruption is a critical stage in a student's development. And students who allow themselves to be "disrupted" will discover that they view life upon return to their college through a very different lens.

A particularly encouraging development is the number of students opting to go to non-English-speaking countries. According to the Institute for International Education, approximately three-quarters of students in 2005 studied in a country where English was not the native language. Both India and China made the list of top 20 most popular destinations, with China attracting more than 6,000 students and coming in at number 8. It is unfortunate, however, that no Arabic-speaking country made the list.

From a career perspective, the willingness of 150,000 students to study in a foreign country where English is not a native language bodes well. But there is a caveat. Most students will go abroad for a maximum of four months. That time is insufficient to truly integrate into a very different society, or for most students to become fluent in a non-European language, no matter how much effort is expended.

To truly gain a career advantage, students will need to take their pre-study abroad language training very seriously (if they're going

to a non-English-speaking country), and to focus on exactly what they want to accomplish. The shorter the course, the more intense the focus needs to be. Students will also need to hit the ground running when they arrive, involving themselves wherever possible with local students and the community in which they live.

Implications for Education Abroad Offices

Education abroad offices often find themselves in a difficult situation. Students and their families demand interesting and enjoyable programs in safe locations—not to mention frequent contact with each other and with the institution. Academic administrators require a strong educational program that is connected to and consistent with institutional values. And all too often, there is pressure to increase the numbers of students who participate.

Balancing multiple demands is tough, especially when stakeholder goals are in conflict. But adding one more goal—the goal of enhancing career advantage—may actually help. That's because, according to the Boston education market research firm Eduventures, incoming freshmen perceive professional preparation as one of the leading drivers of a college's educational value.

Once students recognize that education abroad can provide multiple avenues to achieving professional development goals, they may be more likely to view their time away with a seriousness they may not currently have. And an engaged student abroad will likely be a better student in the classroom.

The challenge for education abroad offices is to ensure that all approved programs have strong potential to encourage the kind of intensive learning that leads to a career advantage. That means, for example, only approving programs where U.S. students will be required to live with families or native students, or where they will be required to communicate—at least for a large percentage of the time—in the language of the country they will be visiting.

Students have figured out how to write compelling essays about their motivation to study abroad. But talk is easy. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the education abroad office to demand that intentions be checked against past actions to ensure the likelihood of the student following through on his or her plans.

The key to success in changing the dynamics of study abroad is threefold: (1) education and preparation. (2) selection, and (3) assessment.

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Education and Preparation

The ability to obtain a broad range of skills and understanding through education abroad needs to be well articulated. These advantages are often taken for granted by students, who don't realize how important it is to approach their international studies with an active and open mindset. Students should be alerted to the fact that studying abroad can both hurt and help a career, depending on how they approach their experience. Duke University is a good example of how study abroad offices can partner with the campus career services office to educate students about the potential value of their experiences, and to explain how skills obtained abroad can be used to a student's benefit. While study abroad offices can advise on the benefits of international experience, students must ultimately take responsibility for their own learning.

Selection

Studying abroad is often perceived as a right: something you can do because you meet minimal grade requirements. To gain a career advantage, however, students should be asked to write more than a

simple essay. They need to demonstrate to the education abroad office, through prior actions, a true commitment to study in a particular country. No one action can do this. However, commitment can easily be demonstrated by a combination of factors such as

- Taking advanced classes in the language of the country
- Taking courses in history, political science, sociology, or in other disciplines that focus on the region of the world where the student wants to study
- Reading newspapers and magazines from the country: foreign newspapers can often be found in college libraries
- Identifying an intellectual interest that can be developed in a particular program
- Taking the initiative to identify an independent study, internship, or volunteer opportunity that complements foreign study

In addition to demonstrating commitment through one of the means listed above, colleges and universities should require that, where appropriate, study abroad applicants engage with international students from the country of interest. Obviously, this is not possible at all insti-

tutions. But many colleges and universities have large international populations, which can be excellent resources for those study abroad applicants.

Assessment

Once goals for a particular education abroad program have been articulated, it is critical that students' understanding and learning be assessed before they go, and upon their return to the United States. If necessary, the postassessment should be made a prerequisite to obtaining academic credit for the program. The education abroad office can also provide a valuable service by working with students to share their international stories. The prevailing "education lite" culture around study abroad will only change when students start to tell their friends about the impact of international experiences on their lives and career.

The Bottom Line

The world needs graduates with a global focus, cross-cultural understanding, and linguistic fluency. Studying abroad is a perfect venue for acquiring and enhancing these skills as well as many others. But building such skills requires intensity of purpose and seriousness of engagement. Frequently, students are seeking the social and physical safety of international programs where they can maintain U.S. habits and lifestyles abroad. And all too often, institutional expectations for student learning—inside and outside the classroom—are low.

Any study abroad experience can potentially provide a career benefit. It is up to colleges and universities to make sure that the students who receive such a benefit are not the exception, but the rule. **IE**

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