

One Size Does Not Fit All

Growing numbers of education abroad offices are helping students create their own unique educational experiences overseas.



A child named Chomoko runs up a hill in northern Thailand. He is a student of Andrew Masters, who taught at an orphanage in Thailand as part of his self-designed education abroad program.

AS ANDREW MASTERS, A STUDENT AT EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY, boarded a plane bound for Bangkok, he couldn't help but notice that he was practically the only Caucasian on the plane. "That was pretty strange," he remembers. "But not quite as strange as the plane ride home, when I was surrounded by a sea of white faces for the first time in ten months."

Elizabeth Giles, a student at Marlboro College in Vermont, had a similar sensation when she first arrived for her internship experience in Ghana. "I was the only white person, the only American, the only university student," she says. And while at first she found this a bit "daunting," Giles says it turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Her experience, working in a children's library during the day, living with a host family, and participating in language and literacy projects in the evenings, helped her develop a strong network of friends, host family, and coworkers, and offered her a very different experience than the one she had had in a previous education abroad program at a university in Ghana. "Being at the university was distancing," she says. "All of my time was spent in a privileged, intellectual environment surrounded by privileged, intellectual students." Being dropped off "solo, into an entirely foreign place... people were much more open and welcoming. And I, in turn, was much more motivated to befriend people that I would have previously regarded as too 'different' from myself to ever have close social relationships with." She was able to achieve a level of integration into the community that had not been possible for her as a student living at the university.

While Giles had previous experience in Ghana, Masters chose to go to Thailand specifically because he wanted to live someplace that he knew very little about. "I wanted to plunge myself into a new situation

and see what happened to me." He began by studying the Thai language and international relations for six months at Mahidol University, about 40 minutes outside of Bangkok. After that, he traveled for a few weeks in Burma and Indonesia. "Finally I found an NGO that owned an orphanage in Northern Thailand in a small Karen village, where I taught English for six weeks." Working abroad, he was able to arrange to earn credit for the teaching.

What "happened to him" is a familiar story. "It expanded my mind in terms of the world outside of America, especially in terms of career opportunities outside of America," Masters says. It also allowed him to achieve his goal of speaking another language. "The last couple of weeks I was in Thailand, most of the people I interacted with on a daily basis could barely speak English," he says. "I completed my goal when I had the experience of 'living' in Thai." Now a senior at EIU, he plans to get additional experience teaching English overseas after graduation.

Masters and Giles are representatives of a growing area in a growing field—students who "create-their-own" education abroad experiences.

Is it a trend? "I think so," says Joel Gallegos, associate provost of international programs at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte. "My sense is that it began as a trend over the last few years as more and more students are beginning their university careers with some international experiences

already under their belt.” Gallegos points out that while traditional Western European education abroad programs continue to capture the interest of many students, “a growing number are motivated by service learning and undergraduate research-based programs that often require a more customized approach.” Gallegos also notes that more and more students are pursuing hybrid programs involving nontraditional disciplines such as engineering or health studies, and are seeking to go to nontraditional destinations. “This type of initiative requires universities to support their students in a different way than a traditional group or exchange program might.”

Wendy Williamson, director of study abroad at EIU says that her own experience in being allowed to create an individualized curriculum as an undergraduate influenced her desire to build flexibility for students to customize their education abroad experiences into the study abroad program at

EIU. “I believe education should be individualized as much as possible, to maximize student learning, potential, and goals,” Williamson says. At EIU, students who want to create their own education abroad experience are guided through an advising process that helps them match their unique goals to a study abroad program or experience. “We have a petition process during which we look for three things: that the host or partner is credible; that the location is safe; and that the credits have been approved by our academic department chairs. If these things are present, then we see the study abroad experience as appropriate to the student’s individual educational goals, and we try to help the student achieve those goals.”

While she is a strong advocate of such programs, Williamson would be the first to admit that it’s not for everyone. “The ideal student is one who takes charge of his or her learning and shows a fair amount of independence,” she says. “Such a student must

possess self-motivation and organizational skills and be adventurous, willing, and able to take some risks. Students who need a great deal of hand-holding or help along the way, or who don’t appear to be organized or have a grasp of their degree requirements and goals, should pursue more structured opportunities.” At EIU, they use a “structure scale” to help in advising students. “In other words, we gauge how much structure is healthy for students as we get to know them.” Most students who pursue individualized programs at EIU self-select in the sense that the opportunity for individualized study abroad is not actively promoted. “We don’t advertise the fact that students can ‘create their own’ experience, other than allowing them to customize their experience through our petition process,” Williamson says. “It comes about through student initiative.”

At Marlboro, students in the World Studies Program (WSP) follow a course of study that integrates liberal arts learning



Children at the orphanage in Thailand listen to announcements under the flag before going home for the day. Their English teacher was Eastern Illinois University student Andrew Masters for six weeks.

and international studies with a six-to-eight month internship in a foreign culture. All students in the WSP design their own overseas internships. “They decide what and where they want to study as best fits their academic plans,” says Beverly Behrmann, associate director of the program. “They have to find an internship in their country of choice and plan a semester’s worth of work through remote tutorials with sponsoring faculty. These students must be highly motivated, well-organized, flexible, and able to enthusiastically embrace the amount of work for predeparture preparations, as well as the in-country internship and academic pursuits. That’s a lot! But these are also great qualities to acquire while completing a bachelor’s degree.”

For her WSP internship, Chrissy Raudonis spent seven months in Argentina learning about ecology and conservation through her work with an Argentine NGO. “I was with a local environmental activist NGO that was campaigning against the country’s extractive, contaminating industries,” Raudonis says. She also volunteered at a native tree nursery, and for the last two months of her stay, she worked with a professor in the forestry department at a nearby university on a reforestation/land use project in the local UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. Now back at Marlboro, Raudonis is working on her senior thesis, which she says has been “heavily influenced” by her experience abroad. “It gave me a new perspective on environmentalism and science in Argentina,” she says. “It made me want to investigate in an academic context many of the attitudes I observed. For example, I noticed that many environmental activists in Argentina frequently use anti-imperialist rhetoric and look at multinational corporations from a neo-colonialist perspective. I’m interested in studying the roots of these attitudes.”

“The students in this program return with confidence, maturity, openness, and a tolerance for ambiguity that they would not have developed from any other kind of experience,” says Behrman. “It is truly amazing to see them go through the entire process, from the conception of ideas through creating and executing their plans, and then returning. I am always impressed.” Certainly graduating



Andrew Masters teaching a “How Old Are You?” English lesson as part of his self-designed education abroad experience.

from such a program, with an international resume already started, offers students a big step forward in a difficult job market.

How Schools Can Help

While a great deal of individual initiative is required for students on “create-your-own” programs to be successful, guidance from education abroad and academic advisers, as well as monitoring of the process from beginning to end, is also very important. According to Gallegos, “Any solid ‘create your own’ experience may require additional support and attention from the education abroad office, along with guidance from the academic departments. It’s not enough to inspire your students to create their own international experiences. If we are to offer such opportunities, it is essential to support and guide students in their project choices and development.” He adds, “Given the more independent nature of a custom-designed program, specific attention should also be given to the goals and learning outcomes of such opportunities.”

Joan Elias Gore, senior academic development consultant at the Foundation for International Education agrees. “Students seeking to engage in direct enrollment at foreign universities need to be sure they understand how the overseas courses operate; how they will be assessed; and how credit verification will be provided, to be sure they

can get credit.” Gore adds that the rules regarding work and volunteer work abroad can be particularly tricky. “Often visa rules are very strict, and students heading out on their own confront great difficulty. For students seeking these kinds of opportunities, it is essential to start at the education abroad office, to be sure they can do what they want to do, and do it safely. Independence is a good thing to nurture, but it is always important to remember that this independence should be informed by faculty, education abroad advisers, health advisers, and others who can provide the kind of information needed to help students have the best possible experiences personally and academically. These folks can help each student choose the right opportunity for him or herself.”

At Marlboro, in addition to close work with faculty and advisers, students engage in preparatory coursework. “Before going to Argentina, I took a number of required courses, including a course on how to find an internship, and how to design fieldwork,” Raudonis says, adding that although the experience was “largely self-directed,” her in-country adviser acted as a link with Marlboro and provided her with support for any academic problems she encountered.

Another important way schools can help students is to provide funding for independent projects abroad. At Colorado College, a venture grant program broadly available to

all students offers students the chance to “get out of the class and do something creative and original,” says Charlotte Blessing, director of international programs. Many students choose to submit proposals for independent education abroad. A panel of college staffers and students headed by an associate dean reviews the proposals, and awards nearly \$200,000 a year to fund a wide variety of student research projects and faculty/student collaboration. Student projects have included making a documentary film in Nigeria, studying education in Japan, and completing an independent dance project in the United States and Ireland, among many others.

At Yale University, a number of fellowships are available to fund independent research abroad. At the Center for International Experience, students can find funding for a wide variety of types of independent experiences, from conducting lab research to traveling through multiple countries engaging in archaeological exploration, to more traditional pursuits in the humanities and social sciences. While at Yale many fellowships are administered through a central office, some are also administered through academic departments and residential colleges. “There are little bits of funding all over the university,” Katie Bell, assistant director of the Center explains. “But they share a common database where they can list these opportunities. The database is helpful, because it’s available to everyone. It helps streamline the process.”

Every year about 250 Yale students take advantage of the opportunity to do independent projects abroad. Last year Yale College launched an initiative assessing student experiences abroad. “The results showed that students who have done independent projects are overwhelmingly excited about how in control of their own lives, their own career and academic paths they feel,” Bell says. The study confirmed what is intuitively obvious: that such study “really fosters a sense of independence and ownership.” Tim Stumph, fellowship adviser, adds, “A lot of the underclassmen came back with a much clearer sense of what they wanted to study. A lot of them changed their majors based on the experience, or came up with the topic for their senior essay. They tended to come

back at a much higher academic level than where they were when they left.”

While Yale requires that all students planning independent research abroad have a home faculty supervisor and the Center for International Experience advises them regarding academic, personal, and career goals, students are encouraged to take care of the logistical arrangements for the experience—housing, travel, etc.—on their own. “That’s one of the wonderful things about these experiences, when they really have to do all that themselves,” says Bell. The Center for International Experience does offer a pre-departure orientation for all students, and strongly urges that all students participate: a majority of them take advantage of the opportunity to do so. Creating an orientation aimed at a large number of students who are doing a wide range of projects and activities all over the world is “challenging” according to Bell. “But it’s also a really great opportunity to involve faculty and international students and scholars. It’s great to work with them: they are so enthusiastic about talking about their home countries.”

There are many benefits of independent education abroad, but perhaps one of the most valuable ones has far-reaching implications no matter what path a student takes after college. When asked about the most important thing she learned from her time in Argentina, Raudonis says, “It’s hard to choose just one thing, but my experience improved my ability to problem-solve and be flexible. I learned to look at things creatively instead of with frustration, and to make the best of inconveniences and less-than-ideal situations. This skill was probably more easily developed in situations where I was responsible for the outcome. I was more motivated to make the experience positive because I had only myself to blame.” **IE**

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