

Education Abroad for Graduate Students

EDUCATION ABROAD has traditionally been done most often at the undergraduate level, but in recent years, graduate students have expressed more interest in studying abroad—and campuses are getting on board to offer them opportunities abroad.

“We believe that international research, fieldwork, and study are critical components of a twenty-first century graduate education,” says Zack Klim, director of academic initiatives and global programs at New York University’s Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development.

At some institutions, international internships and other global education programs at the graduate level have been going on for 30 years or more; at other institutions, the practice is relatively new. But everyone seems to agree that in today’s world, the value if not the necessity of experience abroad as an integral part of a graduate program is inarguable. Some graduate programs are even beginning to require it.

Stepping Up Graduate Education Abroad

“One thing that’s a little different with graduate programming, as opposed to undergraduate, at least at USD, is that graduate students are interested in more nontraditional markets,” says Denise Dimon, associate provost for international affairs at the University of San Diego (USD). “They are much more likely to go to developing countries and emerging markets—in South America, Asia, the Middle East. Ninety percent of our graduate programming is in these types of markets, as opposed to maybe 35 percent for undergraduates. Also, almost all of our graduate programs are experiential. So it’s much more hands-on. They also tend to be shorter, and more intensive than undergraduate programs.”

Rebecca Bellinger, director, Office of Global Initiatives at the Robert H. Smith School of Business at University of Maryland agrees. “In professional schools, there seems to be a shift, moving away from the tour-based, excursion-based opportunities of traditional study abroad, toward project-based learning, where students will work with a client or sponsor, or in some kind of group field project related to a real-life problem,” she says. “We’re seeing a move toward this kind of practical, applied learning. This not only provides a great resource for clients, or whomever you’re working with abroad, typically in the developing

world, but it also allows students to build a portfolio of skills that they can bring into interviews.”

At American University in Washington, D.C., the School of International Service (SIS) recently revised its graduate degree programs in response to the needs of the market. “We launched a new capstone requirement: the graduate practicum, a program designed to give second-year master’s students real-world experience in project management and consulting, while preparing them for postgraduate careers,” says LeeAnne Dunsmore, associate dean of program development and graduate admissions.

Students work in teams with clients that include U.S. and other government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and businesses to conduct policy and program analysis, drawing on their research to prepare final oral and written analysis and recommendations. Practica are led by faculty mentors who hold weekly class sessions: students also participate in hands-on workshops designed to enhance their project management, client relations, and oral and writing skills. And apparently it’s working well. “Within six months of graduation, 89 percent of SIS graduates have found full-time employment in their field of choice,” says Dunsmore.

Global programs for graduate students tend not to be operated out of centralized education abroad offices, but rather through the individual professional schools. At USD, according to Dimon, “Every single graduate school has some kind of international center, or program, centered and organized around the expertise and the programming that those schools want their graduate students to have. Our School of Leadership and Educational Sciences requires an international experience as part of their commitment to understanding multiple perspectives. The Business School requires three international experiences of MBA students who are doing an international track. Our MS Executive Leadership program also requires an international experience. It makes sense to not have it centralized at the graduate level. But they all offer something, and in some schools an international component is required.”



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Designing Programs to Meet Student Needs and Expectations

At the University of Maryland-Baltimore (UMB), where more than 88 percent of the students are seeking graduate degrees in law, medicine, pharmacy, social work, dentistry, or nursing, programs are organized and operated out of the student affairs office in each of the professional schools, although two and a half years ago the institution did establish a Student Center for Global Education, in an attempt “to centralize some of the global activities of the university, get a handle on what’s happening, and better serve the students,” according to the Center’s director, Bonnie Bissonette.

One of the first things they did was to conduct a survey to determine what kinds of international experiences UMB students were interested in; what experiences they’d already had before they arrived there; and what they wanted to experience while they were there.

“What we found is that a statistically significant percentage of the students who took the survey had had international experience as undergrads,” says Bissonette. “And they wanted more. I think our faculty needed to see that.”

Based on the survey, Bissonette and her colleagues were able to show that the number-one reason students hadn’t done anything global was limited money and time, and in response to these results they developed a grant program to fund interprofessional research abroad for their students. The grant brings together at least three participants for each project: one faculty person and at least two students, who must be from different disciplines. One typical program took place in Hong Kong last summer, on the issue of palliative care in China. The supervising faculty member was from the nursing school, and the participating students were from the schools of social work, medicine, and nursing.

“It was really enlightening for the students to see how different cultures approach end-of-life issues differently,” says Bissonette. “Everyone came out of it saying it was really powerful, for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that it’s global.”

Roger Auth, a medical student who participated in the program, stressed the value of working with an interdisciplinary research team, calling it “one of the most rewarding aspects” of the experience. “Prior to this project, I had very little interaction with nursing and social

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work students, nor did I have a firm understanding of their professional training,” says Auth. “I quickly realized that we all had different ways of approaching problems, and different strengths. As the field of medicine becomes more complicated, it is vital to work in an interdisciplinary fashion to improve patient care. This experience made me realize the importance of this approach.”

Lisa Felber, a student in the School of Social Work who also participated in the program, says, “It was extraordinary. I can’t say enough good things about it. It completely changed the way I think about Chinese culture and public health.”

At the Smith School of Business, “Because graduate students are constrained by both time and finances, we try to design programs that will be impactful professionally, so that students come out of the opportunity with a portfolio of work they’ve done on a program, or skills they can present to an employer,” says Bellinger. “One thing we have done is to offer consulting opportunities, where it’s not just a series of business visits in 10 days abroad. Students will first work with clients abroad virtually, developing skills and intercultural understanding with the client while they’re still here. Then they go abroad for 10 days or so, to do client discovery or research on the industry on site, or to give a client presentation, so they’re practicing their intercultural skills in person. Then typically they’ll come back and continue working with the client, again virtually, honing in on those virtual teaming skills, doing final touches on their presentation, or business plan, or other deliverable.” In this model, not only is the learning extended over a longer period of time, so that, as Bellinger points out, “Kolb’s experiential learning cycle of trying something, reflecting on what you did, understanding what you’ve learned, and then trying it again” is practiced. In addition, in these kinds of situations the client or partner will sometimes help by cost-sharing student expenses abroad that can’t be covered by financial aid, such as housing, travel, and meals.

At New York University’s Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, a recent objective has been to transition the portfolio of short-term faculty-led study abroad programs into a more organized global “track” that students can consider from the time they enter a program.

“Increasingly we’ve been planning with department chairs and faculty to identify required courses within a

program of study that could translate well to an international context, and that would really become an integral part of the course of study,” says Klim. “What we’ve created is a new alternative, or optional course of study that fully integrates study abroad opportunities during January and the summer. In some cases it can help students accelerate their progress toward the degree, or to integrate some content area that they might not otherwise have considered. It’s an opportunity for us to get students to think creatively about the courses they’re taking, but also to normalize study abroad on the graduate level, so that when they look at the two-year plan for their academic degree, they can see exactly where those courses fit in.”

Employers Finding Value in Education Abroad

Many education abroad professionals say that one reason education abroad might be more popular among today’s graduate students is that employers are recognizing the value of experience abroad more so than in the past.

“Employers are starting to recognize the importance of a global mindset, or what we call global business savvy,” says Bellinger. “So students who want to be well prepared to enter the job market will actually seek out the opportunities that will give them the skills to stand out as job applicants.”

Leeanne Dunsmore, associate dean of program development and graduate admissions in the School of International Service at American University advises: “Survey students and make sure the programs being developed align with the needs of the current graduate population, and build on the knowledge, competencies, and skills valued by employers hiring your graduates.”

Implementing Opportunities Abroad for Graduate Students

For colleges and universities considering offering new education abroad opportunities to graduate students, it’s important to realize that it is a little bit different than offering programs for undergraduates.

“It’s really important to think through what the goals of the program are,” says Erich Dietrich, assistant vice president for global programs at New York University. “At the graduate level it’s usually not so much about broadening students’ horizons as giving them opportunities to get

deeper into the study of an academic topic in a structured way. It's important for the structure of the program to match the program objectives."

It can be tempting to "jump on the bandwagon" and offer a program that another graduate program offers, but Bellinger cautions that a more careful approach is more likely to achieve results.

"Just because School X, your biggest competitor, has an exciting and innovative program for their students doesn't mean that the same model or partner will work on your campus, or with your students," says Bellinger. "Take the time to invest in needs assessment and program evaluations to know what your students want, what they're capable of, and what the employers in your industry expect from them as future employees. Program design should start with defining the expected learning outcomes, and how it fits into the curriculum."

Global Learning at Home and Abroad

For all its value, Bellinger points out, "Study abroad is not the be-all and end-all of global learning for graduate students. We do study abroad, absolutely—faculty-led

programs, consulting opportunities, even semester exchanges. But we don't stop there. We believe that global learning is most effective when supported by opportunities at home that either will spark a student's interest in intercultural or international business, and/or allow them to continue learning once they've returned home. For this reason we also find ways to help students develop a global mindset without leaving campus—by including global cases and other materials in our core curriculum, presenting our annual Emerging Markets Forum and speakers' series, even by providing opportunities for students to work with clients abroad while here on campus." This is important, because even at a school like Smith, which has an impressive 50 percent rate of participation in study abroad, that is still only half of the students. "We're not forgetting about the other half," she says. **IE**

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