

Bringing Study

By Mark Toner

Study Abroad Programs Are Focusing on Real-World Relevance for Students Before and After They Return

NADIA A. MENDES SAYS SHE KNEW SHE WANTED TO BE A LAWYER SINCE SHE WAS 4 YEARS OLD. But it was the series of study abroad programs the New York native undertook while a student at Babson College—studying corporate social responsibility in Malaysia and Singapore, consulting with a local business in Chile, and participating in a research project on beauty standards in South Africa—that sharpened her focus.

“These experiences abroad never shifted my goal of wanting to be a lawyer, but rather enhanced that goal by showing me I want to practice law internationally [and] become general counsel for a global company and fight for human rights abroad,” says Mendes, who graduated from Babson in December 2017 and is working for a medical center while preparing to apply to law school.

Mendes’s career affirmation reflects the end goal for the more than 332,000 U.S. students who studied abroad for academic credit in 2016–17, according to the International Institute of Education (IIE)’s 2018 *Open Doors* report. Students—and the employers who hire them after graduation—are increasingly seeking programs abroad that are relevant to their personal and professional goals. Accordingly, colleges and universities

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Abroad Home



are continuing efforts to integrate study abroad with academic requirements, career services, and, ultimately, the real-world experiences and skills that help justify the return on investment. As institutions sharpen their overall focus on career readiness, study abroad remains a work in progress.

"It's a mixed bag," says Opal Leeman Bartzis, executive director of education abroad at Michigan State University, which sends more than 3,000 students a year to 300 programs in 60 different countries.

"We find that many industry leaders and players have had personal study abroad experiences, [but] on the other hand, many employers are still unfamiliar with it and think it's an experience students have had in isolation. That's why it's important to articulate.... the acquisition of key skills."

Seeking Relevance

The number of U.S. students participating in study abroad programs has more than tripled since 1990, according to *Open Doors* data. All told, one in 10 U.S. undergraduates now studies abroad before graduating, and the 2.3 percent increase in study abroad students in 2017 represents a continued uptick in participation in recent years.

Even as study abroad programs, and the ways colleges and students think about them, are changing, some long-standing perceptions persist. Most employers see study abroad as a value added—60 percent, according to a literature review by AIM Overseas—but other college experiences still generally rank as higher priorities in the hiring process.

A 2012 survey of employers by the Collegiate Employment Research Institute (CERI) at Michigan State University reflects the old-school perceptions of study abroad. The surveyed employers ranked study abroad as the least important of activities ranging from internships and supervised civic engagement to faculty-led research and professional organizations. The report stresses the importance of dispelling the perception that study abroad is merely "a great vacation with ample pub crawls."

CERI has not evaluated cocurricular activities since 2012, according to Phillip D. Gardner, the center's director. But its findings and those of more recent research (see "Not-so-Soft Skills" on the next page) are not the

Not-so-Soft Skills

Though the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) found that employers consistently ranked study abroad at the bottom of a broad range of desired attributes from 2016 through 2018, students can highlight transferrable academic and career skills obtained through their experiences overseas. Among the skills and competencies cited by study abroad programs and their participants:

- Intercultural competency
- Adaptability
- Tolerance/embracing differences
- International perspectives on subject areas or work culture
- Language skills
- Ability to learn new ideas quickly
- Ability to work in a team
- Problem-solving skills
- Dealing with ambiguity
- Professionalism
- Cultural awareness
- Interpersonal communication
- Locating and evaluating information
- Networking skills and contacts
- Cross-cultural understanding
- Self-sufficiency/resilience
- Appreciation of differences

only perception issues these programs face. Students often question how study abroad stacks up against other experiential opportunities, says Lorien Romito, director of education abroad at Babson College's Glavin Office of Multicultural and International Education.

"There are so many opportunities for students today—becoming a student leader or applying for internships or working while taking classes," she says.

"The way we position ourselves with students is by talking about what you would get out of the experience that you wouldn't if you stayed at Babson."

Yet clear signs of the benefits of study abroad exist. Many of the National Association of Colleges and Employers's (NACE) highly ranked career competencies, including teamwork, professionalism, and communications, can be bolstered through study abroad experiences. Nearly one in three employers (31.1 percent) surveyed in NACE's *Job Outlook* 2018 study rated global and multicultural fluency as an essential attribute for college graduates entering the workforce yet found that only 20 percent of their incoming employees were actually proficient in these cultural skills. "Employers see skills gaps in these areas," the NACE report states.

Institutions are striving to address these gaps by enhancing and expanding their study abroad opportunities. More than 80 percent of employers who responded to an annual survey from the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities (UMN) say that it is always or sometimes an asset for students to have international experience. Babson's postgraduation surveys have found a small increase in employment among study abroad participants and, importantly, no differences in their ability to find jobs in highly competitive fields like finance and tech—a common concern of students, Romito says. And a 2013 assessment by the University System of Georgia found that graduation rates were nearly 20 percent higher for students who studied abroad; the impact was even stronger among minority and low-income students. As with other areas of higher education, these more specific findings reinforce the value of collecting information about outcomes, argues Romito.

"Many education abroad offices aren't looking at this data," she says.

Shifting Priorities

As questions about the cost and relevance of higher education writ large have surfaced, many institutions are focusing more intentionally on career development across all of their programs, including study abroad. At the UMN, for example, study abroad is part of a broader career integration initiative, which has helped bring it closer to other programs of study.

"The nomenclature is being used across campus," says Kim Hindbjorgen, assistant director of curriculum and career integration in UMN's Learning Abroad Center. "We would be remiss if we didn't.... tie this into learning abroad as well."

Study abroad professionals employ several strategies to promote study abroad with all students across campus, which contributes to student success after graduation.

► Emphasizing skills

Employers value the general competencies students obtain through study abroad (see sidebar), but, increasingly, the emphasis is on narrower skills that are often learned through specific, career-focused study experiences.

"Education abroad professionals have dedicated a lot of time exploring global competency development and language acquisition as study abroad outcomes," Romito says. "While we still have those conversations, themes of career integration and professional competency development are becoming just as central."

On the UMN website, descriptions of learning abroad programs convey some of the specific skills and competencies that can be gained to better connect programs to

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career readiness. Students are also encouraged to take an optional one-credit online course to help “articulate the value of your experience to future employers, graduate or professional schools and scholarship committees,” according to the program description.

“Employers are evolving,” says Hindbjorgen. “They’re asking more about international education, but the responsibility to articulate the benefits has been put on students.”

Articulating these acquired skills can help students better understand the benefits of their study abroad experiences. Sixty-four percent of UMN graduates who participated in study abroad said they obtained key skills as part of their experience. However, when asked about more specific competencies, including maturity and personal development, interpersonal and communication skills, self-confidence, and appreciation of and interaction with diverse individuals, more than 85 percent of students said yes—signifying that they had gained these more specific competencies but didn’t immediately recognize them.

“This highlights an obvious need for international educators to help study abroad students acknowledge and value skills obtained during a study abroad experience,” Christine Anderson, the Learning Abroad Center’s assistant director for curriculum and program development, says in an article about the survey.

► **Integrating with career services**

Partnerships between study abroad and career services offices are becoming common. Career services staff can provide students with access to expertise and support

that emphasize the relevancy of their skills acquired abroad. “A lot of our career counselors work one-to-one [with students],” says Becky Hall, UMN’s director of career services administration. “In most of these conversations, they’re talking with students about the transferability of skills [learned abroad] and how they’re applying them to the application and interview process.”

Creating effective partnerships, however, requires intentional work. “It’s easily taken for granted, but we don’t,” says Hall.

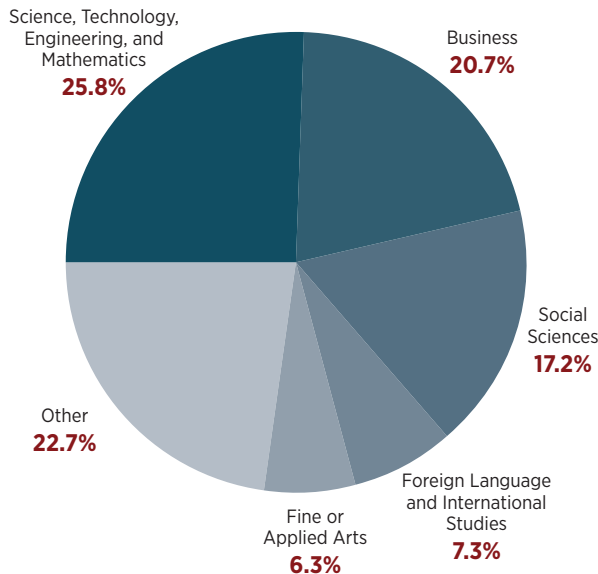
At Babson, efforts to collaborate began with surveys and efforts to communicate the employability of study abroad participants among both students and employers. The departments also jointly created an online module to help students better articulate their skills. Michigan State’s education abroad and career services staff worked together to develop a similar workshop to help students more clearly reflect on newly obtained skills and articulate them on résumés and in interviews. The education abroad office also has a dedicated staff member who serves as a liaison to career services, says Bartzis.

► **Working closely with academic programs**

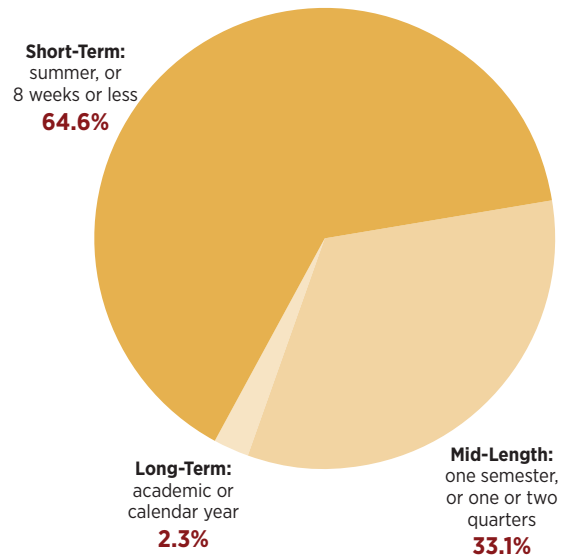
Faculty-led programs are increasingly centered on specific learning objectives connected to programs of study. Michigan State University’s College of Arts & Letters, for example, created the Excel Network, which integrates academic programs with internships, study abroad, and other experiential learning opportunities around six “career communities,” ranging from entrepreneurship, business, and innovation to nonprofit, education, and social impact.

Study Abroad: A Snapshot

Top Five Major Fields of Study



Duration of Study Abroad Programs



Source: IIE's 2018 *Open Doors* report

Institutions are also incorporating study abroad experiences into programs of study. Babson offers a two-credit course called “Encounters with BRIC,” during which students spend a month each in Russia, India, and China, as well as participate in a two-week predeparture program and reentry and debriefing sessions that tie together the skills they developed during the experience.

► Creating international internship opportunities

There are also a variety of noncredit programs abroad that have potential for enhancing students’ career readiness. Internships, service-learning, and research make up the bulk of these noncredit programs; almost 37,000 U.S. students participated in noncredit opportunities abroad in 2016–17, according to *Open Doors* data. Doing so can help alleviate the perceived “opportunity cost” of study abroad in the place of U.S.-based internship opportunities, according to Romito.

One key to maximizing student outcomes is reinforcing the value of learning both specific career skills and differences in workplace cultures around the world. “That’s how you make the experience beyond just doing the same thing, but in Buenos Aires,” Bartzis says.

Short-Term Study Abroad

Across all institutions in the United States, 64.6 percent of for-credit study abroad opportunities are now considered short-term—defined as programs of 8 weeks or

less, according to *Open Doors* data. At some institutions, these programs enroll the majority of students who participate in study abroad.

At the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, 60 percent of study abroad students enroll in short-term faculty-led programs, says Hindbjorgen. The challenge, she says, is that, at times, students “come back and don’t understand the relevance of their short-term experience” without intentional opportunities for reflection.

Encouraging this reflective nature requires more than reentry programming, says Babson’s Romito. Short-term programs, she says, must help students assess learning and cultural experiences “while they’re having the experience rather than just reflecting on it when they return. That way, they can be much more intentional in their learning.”

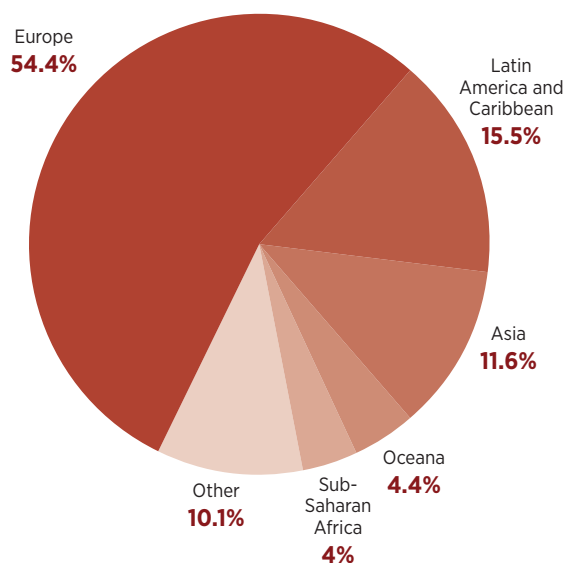
At the same time, short-term programs such as Michigan State’s First-Year Seminar Abroad, which entering freshman take the summer before starting classes, help offer new, more affordable opportunities for a wider pool of students to gain international experience.

“There’s plenty to celebrate about the growth [of short-term programs],” Bartzis says. “We want more of our students to be able to benefit from this kind of learning.”

What’s Next

As colleges and universities continue to emphasize career preparation and relevance, study abroad

Where Students Go



programs will continue to evolve in the coming years. Further integration of study abroad and academics means that there will be a shift from stand-alone reentry programs to more intentional efforts to combine the study abroad experience with existing programs of study. Michigan State is moving toward having students develop explicit learning plans for their study abroad experiences, including setting personal, professional, and academic goals, and sharing what they have learned with peers in traditional courses.

“We’re talking about the integration of learning to positively impact the people around you who didn’t study abroad,” Bartzis says.

New avenues for international experiences will emerge, including international research. The growth of international internships and research programs abroad provide additional opportunities to attain specific professional development skills, as do specific career-focused areas such as student teaching abroad.

While these experiential programs can help students enhance their employability, it is also important to consider what these experiences bring to further studies. “We’re talking a lot about career, and that’s huge,” says UMN’s Hindbjorgen. “We also have a huge contingent of students who go on directly to graduate and professional school. They need to be thoughtful about how these experiences can help them write a more compelling professional statement.”

As institutions focus on the overall cost of higher education, ensuring the affordability of study abroad and providing opportunities for diverse and first-generation students remain key challenges. Over the past decade, the proportion of minority students studying abroad has increased from 17 percent in 2005–06 to 29.2 percent in 2016–17, according to *Open Doors* data. Along with affordability-focused efforts like scholarships and short-term programming, institutions also emphasize the value of outreach to nontraditional study abroad populations, particularly through peer advisers and student-led groups like Michigan State’s Spartan Abroad Global Ambassadors that reflect the diversity of their broader student populations.

The Impact

Ultimately, the value of study abroad rests in its ability to help students meet their personal and professional goals. For Babson College’s Mendes, the experience helped hone her language skills, which resulted in larger opportunities during an internship at a district attorney’s office. It also provided talking points during subsequent job interviews. But that was just the beginning, she says.

“It allowed me to not only show off the skills I’ve gained abroad, but also a chance to showcase one of my passions,” Mendes says. “At this very early stage in my career, it was important for me to connect with my boss and my coworkers in this way.... I know that as I continue to climb toward my dream job, this landing point will prove to be fruitful.” ■

MARK TONER is an education writer based in Washington, D.C.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

NAFSA Resources

“Helping Students Translate Study Abroad for the Job” e-Learning Seminar: bit.ly/2BaoRLd

Incorporating Education Abroad into Your Career Plan: bit.ly/2Q11IKI

Making Meaning of Education Abroad Journal (and Facilitator’s Guide): bit.ly/2RYv6HP

“Advising Globally Mobile Students for Career Success” e-Learning Seminar: bit.ly/2qOgeQx

Additional Resources

NACE Job Outlook 2018: bit.ly/2DijF43

Lessons from Abroad: lessonsfromabroad.org

MSU Excel Network: excelnetwork.cal.msu.edu

“Assessing Education Abroad Outcomes”: bit.ly/2DpoCOD

UMN Career Relevance Resources: bit.ly/2QKDdL

Career Integration: Reviewing the Impact of Experience Abroad on Employment: Volume 1 (bit.ly/2FoED9G) and *Volume 2* (bit.ly/2PxaAKM)