

## Leading Study Abroad

An interview with Arcadia University President  
Nicolette DeVille Christensen

**NICOLETTE DeVILLE CHRISTENSEN** was named president of Arcadia University, in Glenside, Pennsylvania, in 2013. Last year marked the sixth consecutive year, and the seventh time in the past eight years, that Arcadia had been ranked number one for student participation in study abroad by the *Open Doors* report, published annually by the Institute of International Education, which is supported by a grant from the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the U.S. Department of State. DeVille Christensen joined Arcadia in 2008, becoming vice president and executive director of the Center for Education Abroad, and leading its transition to The College of Global Studies. The College received the Nikolai N. Khaladjan International Award for innovation and achievement in international education by the American Association of University Administrators, and was recognized by the Pennsylvania Council for International Education for championing global education within the state. She has served on task forces, professional boards, and committees for organizations such as the Association of International Education Administrators and the United Nations Task Force on Education.

Before coming to Arcadia, DeVille Christensen was executive director of global academic management at New York University. She also taught business management for 13 years at Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina, serving as department chair and director of study abroad. DeVille Christensen earned a doctoral degree in leadership and cultural foundations with a focus on international business and ethics from the University of North Carolina, Greensboro.

**IE: Since you became president of Arcadia in 2013, the university has enrolled its largest undergraduate and graduate classes in its history. What are the reasons for this growth?**

**DeVILLE CHRISTENSEN:** We have created pathways to our outstanding academic and international education programs, through unique opportunities such as First Year Programs Abroad, international experiences embedded in our curriculum, one-week learning opportunities abroad in the first year known as Preview, and disciplinary excellence in the undergraduate liberal arts curriculum. Arcadia's national reputation and distinctive graduate programs in areas of high demand, such as Physician Assistant, Physical Therapy, Genetic Counseling, and Public Health, generate strong enrollment at the graduate level.

The diversity of offerings such as our MBA in the School of Global Business, and programs in forensic science, international peace and conflict resolution, creative writing, education, and many more, help us to appeal to a variety of graduate students with different pedagogical needs.

And, of course, our range of international opportunities for focused disciplinary study in a global context continues to attract students who recognize the importance of global experience to prepare them for lives of meaningful and creative service and work.

**IE: Arcadia University has a long history of education abroad that began in 1948, and in 2009 it created The College of Global Studies. How is study abroad infused into the campus culture and how does it**



Nicolette DeVille Christensen

**affect students today? Do incoming students expect that study abroad will be part of their education at Arcadia?**

**DeVILLE CHRISTENSEN:** Imagine a group of women studying abroad, bicycling across war-ravaged Europe following WWII, with a journalism professor discussing and writing about such topics as destruction, reconstruction, immigration, displaced peoples and migration. Remarkable, isn't it?

That's how our study abroad program started, and this legacy is central to students' interest in studying at Arcadia. Arcadia has sought over the last twenty years to increase

the level of inclusion in and focus our engagement to include more students in study abroad. An excellent example is our groundbreaking Preview program, begun in 1994, which offers short-term study in a myriad of locations to any first-year student through a high level of subsidy and endeavors as well to include participation across our community of the faculty and staff. It is also framed by a two-credit course designed to engender intentional reflection on these encounters, and to build strong cohort relationships that foster peer-to-peer learning and opportunities for personal growth.

The College of Global Studies has also embraced this commitment in its work with students from other institutions.

At Arcadia, we encourage our community to aspire to what I like to call "The Life of the Mind." Faculty present world issues in the classroom challenging our students to think globally, even if they haven't studied abroad. It is in our university DNA here to be mindful of the world and our external environs.

**IE: Arcadia's 2013–2018 strategic plan includes five parts, one of which is "committing to institutional diversity and global engagement." How will you reach some of the objectives, which include establishing new programs with global education partners and recruiting an increasingly diverse student population?**

**DeVILLE CHRISTENSEN:** International diversity and global engagement are two aspects of the same endeavor. We aspire to have a student body that better reflects the diversity of the USA as well as the world. A wider representation of races, ethnicities, and cultures expresses our institutional identity and enriches our campus life and our society. These strategic objectives impact the entire institution and affect how we approach enrollment policies, affordability, retention, and student support. These are not separate priorities but part of an integrated strategy.

**IE: You started at Arcadia as vice president for the Center for Education Abroad, which is now The College of Global Studies. What are some of the innovations you pursued there?**

**DeVILLE CHRISTENSEN:** The most important change was the transition from a Center to a College. This affirmed that education abroad was equal to all the other academic units and that these activities and learning goals were not incidental to the university's mission. They were subject to the same evaluations and obligations imposed on any other academic unit. I believe that

this action was unique in U.S. higher education and made a profound statement.

Other innovative initiatives included creating a Center for Research and Assessment, a unit that would go on to develop the award-winning international education program assessment model ATLAS; development of a Co-Curricular Learning Certificate; structuring a full-fledged academic division within The College of Global Studies; and appointing one of the nation's first full-time health and safety directors.

**IE: You expanded Arcadia's global presence by creating centers in 10 cities worldwide. What was the strategy behind that expansion?**

**DeVILLE CHRISTENSEN:** We encourage students to step out from their familiar environments and home institutions and move toward alternative environments where they encounter new assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors. This is ideally achieved by helping students to study in more diverse locations, but for those students who can't study abroad, we also create an ethos of internationalization at home. What we learn abroad informs and permeates our curriculum at home.

The centers have increased our ability to respond innovatively to the realities of offering study abroad in a world of diminished resources. They allow us to build hubs of activity that can be directed to multiple ends, including providing traditional group and hybrid semester and summer programs, supporting semester direct-enrollment at host country institutions, and offering a flexible platform for faculty-led cohort programs. We can also support programming models directed at underrepresented academic constituencies such as STEM.

The centers allow us to engage with issues of inclusion. If the engaged learning that study abroad provides is truly a central component of the higher education mission, then we must recognize that the economic, social, and educational ground is shifting beneath our feet, and acknowledge the level of social and economic inequality that often shapes the lives of our students. We need

to approach developing programs in a truly multifaceted manner that engages the multifaceted challenges of these realities. And our centers allow us to do so by providing a flexible platform for pursuing such innovation.

Issues of community service and social justice are inherent in the Arcadia mission, and also in the missions of many of the universities and local jurisdictions with whom we collaborate, so we are committed to this continued ethos through engagement with local communities both here and abroad. That same dedication applies to our study abroad centers around the world that foster reciprocal contexts for community engagement.

**IE: You established a full-time health and safety director for all of your centers worldwide. How has it worked?**

**DeVILLE CHRISTENSEN:** Our primary objective is to ensure the health and safety of our students, which is critical to their learning experience. We know from the work of the Forum on Education Abroad and other sources that studying abroad is no more dangerous than studying on our home campuses. Nobody can guarantee the safety of anybody anywhere, but we can make standards of health and safety as high as possible. We established the position of health and safety director, based in the United States, to coordinate the needs of our students and prepare our staff to deal with any emergency that may arise in transit or in-country. The job of the director is to ensure the uniformity of those standards across all of Arcadia's locations abroad. Our record suggests that this has been an effective strategy.

Arcadia's model on health and safety has grown to include dedicated staff in every center around the world, who monitor and assess international health and safety data; create and review appropriate emergency plans for all overseas sites; and keep students, families, and home school advisers informed of situations, should they arise.

**IE: Early in your career, you served as director of study abroad at Guilford College in North Carolina, and later,**

**you served at New York University. How important are study abroad programs for developing the next generation of global leaders?**

**DeVILLE CHRISTENSEN:** Study abroad programs help create the kinds of empathy in our students that can only benefit our geopolitical future. The experience of the world for many of the previous generations was based upon military service: a conflict model. Without denigrating the contribution of those generations, experiences based on engagement rather than suspicion and tension are more likely to create an ethos of respect and understanding. One doesn't have to subscribe to the utopian notion that education abroad will bring world peace (which it hasn't) to understand that there is greater potential for positive relationships between nations if we are better educated to understand rather than fear: if the transactions between nations are conducted through words rather than bullets we will have achieved something of profound importance.

**IE: What trends do you see developing for study abroad programs?**

**DeVILLE CHRISTENSEN:** In some ways creating The College of Global Studies anticipated the growing awareness that study abroad has to be seen as a serious academic endeavor positioned in the heart of the institution.

I also see a trend in which U.S. study abroad recognizes that it functions in a global environment and that we have much to learn from what's happening in Europe, Asia, Australasia, and elsewhere. I believe a new era of global cooperation may emerge for undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and staff.

Study abroad cannot be immune from the perfectly credible aspiration to make our students potentially more employable. The demand for mechanisms that respond to this imperative will increase and we have to create structures that aid students in their career preparation.

Studying abroad can give students experiences relevant to the world of work, such



**Study abroad  
must be seen as an  
intrinsically significant  
academic experience  
that enriches student  
learning both in personal  
and professional  
contexts.**

as through internships and research abroad. Further, study abroad must be seen as an intrinsically significant academic experience that enriches student learning both in personal and professional contexts.

Providing international opportunities to graduate students is equally important. We are proud that approximately one-third of our graduate students engage in a study abroad experience, and I expect more institutions will embrace the idea that all curriculum must be relevant to the global context.

**IE: In the most recent U.S. News & World Report rankings, Arcadia was in the top 50 for study abroad programs. What makes the program at Arcadia unique?**

**DeVILLE CHRISTENSEN:** Integration and inclusion are key differentiators for us. When The College of Global Studies evolved, it was to make that commitment an institutional reality. Our Office of International Affairs plays a significant role in ensuring that our international student population is integrated into our academic and campus life. Arcadia University simply would not be what it is as an institution without the comprehensive infusion of global perspectives across all aspects of institutional life.

Another point of distinction is that the College of Global Studies allows us to extend our programs to serve other institution's international missions and objectives for their students where resources may be more limited. We contribute to the enhancement of learning abroad across a wide range of institutions. This is a profound achievement consistent with our legacy and reflects our awareness of the needs of our students whose future will be shaped by global realities.

We have several opportunities for all students, from first-year students to seniors, transfer students, and graduate students, to have international education experiences. Our Board of Trustees embraces this mission and helps to support these programs in countless ways.

**IE: More than 65,000 students have studied abroad with Arcadia. How does**

**this global network support students once they graduate?**

**DeVILLE CHRISTENSEN:** Just last month, the 70,000th student studied abroad with Arcadia, a milestone number in the 70 years we have been facilitating international education experiences for students. We have found that international academic experiences non only increase student retention, but also enhance our engagement with alumni. Many students who study abroad form their own networks, as their experiences bond them in unique ways. The university facilitates and encourages alumni networks and programs for students who have studied abroad, which we have found to be effective tools in keeping alumni engaged around the world.

We have, as a consequence of our endeavors, forged a kind of community that transcends geography. Wherever I go in the world I can connect with a diverse collection of individuals who identify themselves at one level or another with the Arcadia community. This sense of identity persists for a lifetime as evidenced by the number of Arcadia students who still, over many years, maintain active communication with our institution. These personal interactions, at home and abroad, are in many ways the most satisfying aspect of my work.

**IE: Your doctoral degree included a focus on international business and ethics. As a student, what led you to study international issues?**

**DeVILLE CHRISTENSEN:** It is my contention that business and ethics are topics that transcend national boundaries. Almost all business is inevitably international in operation and intention. In a related sense, questions of ethics are not limited by geo-

graphical space. Questions of human rights are clearly universal. If we consider the factors that inform the notion of a civil society, we are inexorably drawn into transnational contexts. These concepts tie into all business constructs that I discussed with my students.

These were topics that personally interested me and fit within my own academic area of growth and expertise, as I was teaching business and ethics during that period in my life. But they also reflected my own sense that all knowledge transcends the nation.

**IE: How can colleges and universities champion study abroad as a key component of a college education that prepares graduates to enter a global workforce?**

**DeVILLE CHRISTENSEN:** Faculty champions are key. They are the primary influencers and mentors. Staff play a pivotal role as well. Knowledge is not constrained by borders. Students benefit by understanding and experiencing that reality. They should also be realistic by acknowledging to students that studying abroad on its own is not necessarily a distinctive benefit in the workplace. The benefit derives from the student's ability to translate those experiences into skills that can be described to potential employers. Study abroad should enhance students' capacity for adaptability, self-reliance and problem-solving among all the other advantages that are familiar within the rhetoric of the field.

In our justified enthusiasm for the benefits of study abroad we should avoid the implication that study abroad is essential for the development of employable skills. As a serving president I am acutely aware that all of our students have the right to an education that empowers them to live richer lives in the workplace and in the world beyond work. Study abroad is one route to that good place but other paths may lead in other directions toward the same destination. **IE**

---

**KEN BUDD** has written for *The New York Times*, *National Geographic*, *Smithsonian*, *The Washington Post*, and many more publications. He is the author of the award-winning memoir, *The Voluntourist* (HarperCollins).