

By Charlotte West

Making It Fresh

How and Why Colleges Are Broadening Education Abroad Beyond Juniors and Seniors

EDUCATION ABROAD HAS TRADITIONALLY BEEN SEEN as something that students pursue only when they become juniors or seniors, but administrators are increasingly encouraging sophomores and even freshmen to go abroad: The Institute of International Education's latest *Open Doors* report shows that 3.9 percent of U.S. education abroad students were freshmen—up from 3.1 percent the decade before.

Although the duration and type of these efforts varies according to the needs and goals of the universities, they are united by indications that sending students abroad earlier brings more benefits to both the student and the institution.

Doing It Differently

Reflecting the wide diversity of U.S. campuses and their reasons for sending students abroad, their initiatives cover a wide spectrum of approaches. Some

institutions, such as New York University and Florida State University (FSU), utilize branch campuses and overseas study abroad sites to allow students to spend their entire freshman year abroad. FSU freshmen can spend their first year at one or more of FSU's four study abroad sites in the United Kingdom, Spain, Italy, or Panama. Students can complete their general education requirements and then receive in-state tuition for the remainder of their education at the main campus in Tallahassee.



Other institutions use their own overseas sites to offer short-term first-year programs abroad. Freshmen at St. John's University, for instance, take a seven-day trip to the institution's campus in Rome and study-abroad site in Paris as an experiential component of a full-semester course.

St. John's University has also used its first-year abroad program, Global Passport, as a way to encourage underserved populations to study abroad. More than half of its students identify as students of color and about 40 percent of them are eligible for Pell grants. To keep costs down, they have chosen an embedded model with the seven-day immersion experience, for which students are charged only a \$500 program fee plus the cost of airfare.

Pitt Plus3, an interdisciplinary program between the Swanson School of Engineering and the College of Business Administration at the University of Pittsburgh (Pitt), takes freshmen in both schools abroad for two weeks immediately following their spring semester to explore an industry in a particular country.

"Plus3 is an early exposure program aimed toward increasing the global competence of all [business and engineering] students prior to graduating," says Bryan Schultz, director of international programs in the College of Business Administration.

Other institutions have recently implemented initiatives that take all freshmen abroad. Since 2015, every first-year student at Agnes Scott College has taken part in a week-long global immersion experience embedded within a globally themed class that takes place in the middle of spring semester. The program fees are included in tuition at no additional cost to students.

Benefitting Students

"This formative experience can help shape students' trajectories at the institution—what major they choose, their area of focus, etc.," says Janelle S. Peifer, an assistant professor in psychology at Agnes Scott.

In fact, data collected from students for a campus longitudinal study indicated significant gains in Agnes Scott students' intercultural competence and overall engagement with the college after their freshman immersion experience compared with baseline data.

While Pitt and Agnes Scott have created short-term travel opportunities for freshmen, other institutions allow students to spend full semesters of their first year abroad. University of Tampa's commitment to

VOICES FROM THE FIELD Practical Advice

"Develop the program around an easy-to-understand, nontechnical theme to help communicate the focus of the program to incoming freshmen."

—*Bryan Schultz, University of Pittsburgh*

"Be purposeful in selecting qualified students for their academic capability, open-minded attitudes, and mature self-care and transitional skills."

—*Janice Finn, Arcadia University*

"Integrate first-year programming into existing strategic plans and tap into external community partners as well as internal stakeholders."

—*Marca Bear, University of Tampa*

"Create partnerships with program providers to meet the unique challenges of this age group."

—*Elaine Meyer-Lee, Agnes Scott College*

"Parents are very involved with freshmen. We provide multiple parent-focused predeparture sessions. We also provide slightly more service than we would for other groups. For example, we almost always require students to fly with us because we find that assuages so many of the parents' concerns and brings them on board."

—*Matthew Pucciarelli, St. John's University*

building up students' international competence spurred the creation of a four-year pipeline beginning with a first-year semester abroad option in Dublin, Ireland, or Seville, Spain.

The program helps students plan for additional international experiences later in their college careers. "Faculty mentors provide reentry programming and assist students in deepening their global experience through internationally themed academic programs or planning for another international experience," says Marca Bear, associate dean of international programs at Tampa.

Going Early and Often

Valerie Quickel traveled to China as a freshman—along with a cohort of 26 other University of Pittsburgh engineering and business students—to learn about the smartphone industry, and says the experience both deepened her academic understanding and whetted an appetite to study abroad again.

“As a business student, I do a lot of case studies on China, so being able to tour the plants and actually see what’s going on firsthand was cool. It was also useful to understand [how to manage] partnerships with the engineers,” says Quickel, a global management and marketing major who studied abroad again in Paris the next year.

Quickel’s repeat-customer status is not an outlier: In a peer-reviewed published study in the *Journal of Education for Business*, two University of Pittsburgh educators—Kristine Lalley, director of international engineering initiatives for the Swanson School of Engineering, and Josephine E. Olson, professor of business administration at the Joseph M. Katz Graduate School of Business and College of Business Administration—found that more than 40 percent of Plus3 students in both engineering and business who studied abroad as freshmen later participated in additional global educational experiences.

“Having a bunch of freshmen go abroad means that the sophomore year conversation changes substantially,” agrees Matthew Pucciarelli, associate provost of global studies at St. John’s University. “Even those students who didn’t go abroad see their peers and now begin thinking about study abroad more seriously.”

Meeting Needs

Along with the extra benefits of early study abroad, university administrators say the challenges of offering study abroad to freshmen create a need for extra student support and thoughtful solutions.

Janice Finn, associate dean of international affairs at Arcadia University, says that Arcadia’s freshman abroad programs have been designed to include a robust support structure. “First-years abroad still have the same developmental concerns as first years on [our] Glenside campus in suburban Philadelphia,” she says.

Pitt’s Plus3 program specifically focuses on providing students with introductory knowledge in their fields of study. “Because these students typically have not yet developed content-specific knowledge in a particular field of study, programs must take into account that participants have a less-developed knowledge base about global issues, especially about global engineering and business practices.... Students are introduced to global engineering and business practices at a level at which they can relate their developing knowledge to what they experience during the program,” says Schultz.

The practical side of sending students abroad can also be more complicated for freshmen. “One of the challenges of sending first-year students abroad is managing the logistics. International travel and organizing the necessary materials can be complex, especially so early in students’ college careers and with little lead time,” Peifer says.

Agnes Scott Associate Vice President for Global Learning and Leadership Development Elaine Meyer-Lee adds that institutions also need to think about things like obtaining release forms from parents, as some freshman may still be minors. “Even details like getting passports and visas in time can present great challenges,” she says.

Institutions have found that addressing such issues is also something that’s best done early: Pittsburgh overcomes the passport obstacle proactively by requiring students to already have a passport at the time they apply to participate in the Plus3 program, which occurs the summer after their freshman year.

Working Together

To maximize their effectiveness, officials say, study abroad offices also need to work closely with enrollment management and admissions offices. St. John’s uses the Paris and Rome programs as a talking point for freshman recruitment.

“We’re not the ones selling and advertising the program. For [first-year programs] to be successful, study abroad opportunities have to be folded into the university’s messages and promotions for prefreshmen so students are coming in with this idea in mind,” Pucciarelli says.

Schulz agrees. He says that an intentional approach to marketing has doubled the number of business students participating in Pitt’s Plus3 program over the last four years: “We have learned that it is too late if promoting the program begins once students arrive on campus. During the past four years, the College of Business embeds Plus3 into all recruitment contacts. By the first day of school, each first-year [business] student has heard about Plus3 seven times.”

Despite all the extra logistical and other considerations involved in sending freshmen abroad to study, Arcadia University’s Finn says the resulting experiences make a deep and lasting impression: “The Preview program expands students’ minds and lets them gain a different perspective of the world, including the U.S., that is profound.” ■

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