



STUDY ABROAD PARTICIPANTS GAIN SKILLS THAT EMPLOYERS VALUE,



BUT UNIVERSITIES HAVE TO HELP THEM CONNECT THE DOTS BETWEEN INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND FUTURE EMPLOYABILITY.

For more than a decade, the University of Minnesota has offered a one-credit, online course to undergraduate students while they are studying abroad. The course, entitled “Global Identity: Connecting Your International Experience with Your Future,” helps students reflect on their time overseas and translate the experience into marketable skills that employers seek.

The Global Identity course is just one way the university strives to align its study abroad programs with students’ future careers. Creating a connection with employability is just as important as some of the other lofty goals set by study abroad offices, such as fostering cross-cultural appreciation, offering opportunities for self-growth and learning a new language.

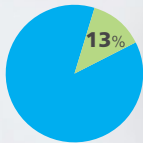
“People are looking at study abroad professionals for set outcomes aside from global citizenship—something concrete we can give students who are paying all this money,” says Christine Anderson, Academic Director at the University of Minnesota’s Learning Abroad Center. “It’s very important for us to claim this space and help our students articulate what they have learned to employers.”



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A GAP IN **PERCEPTION**

Many of the skills that students gain while studying abroad are identical to ones that employers claim to value in the 21st Century—a global mindset, problem solving, critical thinking, solid communication skills, flexibility, creativity, and independence.



Yet in a 2015 study by Hart Research Associates for the Association of American Colleges & Universities, only 13 percent of the 400 employers interviewed indicated they were “much more likely to consider” hiring a recent college graduate who had participated in a study abroad program.

“I don’t think corporate America gets a lot of information about global education unless their own children have gone abroad,” says Cynthia Banks, an instructor at the Leeds School of Business at the University of Colorado and Director of New World Vistas. “Study abroad is often defined as an experience, and it doesn’t immediately elicit what skills or knowledge someone has gained through that experience.”

So there is a disconnect between what tangible skills students gain while abroad and how employers perceive the study abroad experience. In order to bridge that gap, students must first be aware of the competencies and knowledge they’ve gained, then be able to eloquently communicate what they’ve learned to potential employers. That’s where universities need to step in and help.

“Students will gain the necessary skills and competencies required by employers only if the structure of the study abroad program they participate in facilitates that,” says Martin Tillman, President of Global Career Compass. “It doesn’t happen by magic. The onus is on how thoughtfully and purposefully a particular program is structured.” He adds that a well-structured program focuses on three phases of study abroad—before, during, and after.

A 3-TIERED ADVISING **APPROACH**

“In the best case scenario, study abroad advising comprises three components—purposeful advising from both career and study abroad staff at the time students are considering going abroad, intentional reflection and feedback while students are abroad, and debriefing when students return,” says Tillman.



UPFRONT ADVISING

Students need to hear about and understand the link between study abroad and their future careers while they are considering programs. For example, they need to understand how a service learning opportunity in Guatemala will help them as a business major and eventual employee of a corporation or nonprofit organization. This helps students “view potential opportunities with the right lens,” says Tillman.

Students also need to recognize that developing career skills—and being able to coherently talk about them on resumes and in job interviews—requires work. “We need to identify the disconnect with students and make them aware that future employees may not intuitively understand the value of study abroad,” says Banks. “We need to make students aware that they will have to do some additional work.”

One of the steps that the University of Minnesota asks of those considering studying abroad to do is meet with a career counselor to discuss career implications and opportunities, as well as what skills and proficiencies the student hopes to acquire.



ONSITE REFLECTION

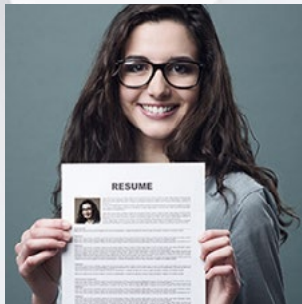
“Too often the entire process of career integration falls apart when the student leaves the United States,” says Tillman. “It’s very rare that a program incorporates intentional reflection and feedback.” For instance, universities may ask students to contribute to a blog while studying abroad, but posts often talk vaguely about how much fun the students are having and are accompanied by selfies in front of a popular tourist destination. It’s much more valuable if an advisor can help students think through how the experience dovetails with their career aspirations.

“Students don’t always know what’s happening or they aren’t able to articulate it,” says Anderson. “It’s our role as educators to guide them in understanding.” She teaches a class to students while they are abroad that asks them to reflect upon the skills they are gaining, then discuss those skills in “employer language.” So if a student says she has honed her time management skills, Anderson helps her explain why that would be of value to an employer and add a story that highlights her time management skills.

“I really like the idea of talking to students about their skills and career development onsite because they are a captive audience,” says Anderson. “Their minds are in the game, and they are interested in thinking about it.” She recommends conducting onsite reflection toward the end of a study abroad program when students are introspective and ready to think about all they have gained.



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RE-ENTRY DEBRIEFING

“Where I think most campuses are most comfortable talking about career integration is when students come back,” says Tillman. However, schools often complain of poor attendance at return events. He offers two pieces of advice: Offer credit for return seminars, and hold them as soon as possible. Otherwise, as Anderson says, students “scatter to the wind” when they return to campus.

Tillman cites a return event held by Michigan State University as a best practice. “Unpacking Your Study Abroad Experience” is an interactive workshop that helps returning students present their experience in resumes, job applications, cover letters, and interviews.



For the past five years, the Learning Abroad Center at the University of Minnesota has worked hand-in-hand with career counselors to guide study abroad alumni. The university also invites employers and organizations such as the Peace Corps to re-entry events so students can network.

“Our students don’t hear about the link between study abroad and employability just one time,” says Anderson. “They hear about it in advising before they leave, during the program while they are abroad, and upon re-entry.” That helps ensure that study abroad truly is transformative—both personally and professionally.



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