

EXPANDING

EDUCATION BEYOND PROGRAMMATIC TIMEFRAMES

When David Wick completed his dissertation for his doctorate in education several years ago, he had an “a-ha” moment: “I thought I was trying to see how change and growth occurred for students during study abroad, but I found out that change began to happen as soon as students started to imagine the possibility of study abroad for themselves,” recalls Wick.

Wick has used that discovery to help shape the entire study abroad experience, first when leading study abroad at San Francisco State University and Santa Clara University and now as Assistant Professor at Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey. When universities embrace the idea that learning begins when students consider study abroad as a real possibility, they can examine outreach, advising, and application and preparation processes with the express intent of promoting whole student learning. That learning process then continues during and after the trip.

ENGAGING STUDENTS EARLY ON

So exactly *when* in the process can universities begin to educate study abroad students? Wick says it’s as soon as students take their first action related to study abroad. It may be when they attend an information session, drop by the study abroad office for advising, initiate a conversation with a peer mentor or pick up a brochure about a program.

“That is the moment when some change is already happening with students—some new opening is available for reimagining themselves and

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continued



their future,” says Wick. “To me, that’s the first opportunity we have as international educators to begin to connect with our students and help them build toward the future they want.”

Early learning may be exploratory, but it’s a critical step in whole student learning. For instance, if a student’s interest is sparked in short-term programs to Australia or Cuba because professors mention them in passing during class, he or she will likely be more attuned to any references to those countries. “Now those places on the map are more real to the student,” says Wick. “If they see news articles or meet someone who has been to those countries, they are going to have a certain reaction. There’s something else they can connect to.”

With the seed planted, universities can then capitalize on their advising process and application structures to build on student growth. “There’s an opportunity to think about advising and the application not as tools to complete an administrative process, but as supports for effective learning,” says Wick. “We can shift a transactional relationship into a learning partnership.”

Wick asserts that most study abroad program applications include questions to gauge student interest in studying abroad or prove they can craft a compelling argument for participation. “Essay writing is a separate skill that may not advance the underlying purpose and goals for international education,” he argues. Instead, universities should consider using applications to help students develop knowledge about the country they will visit and raise intercultural awareness. That may include writing an essay about the country that requires research and citations.

RECONSIDERING STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES

To truly facilitate holistic learning that begins when students consider study abroad, universities should first take a step back and examine student learning outcomes associated with study abroad in general and with each program. “When we extend the timeframe of learning, we can extend our thinking about what types of learning objectives are possible,” says Wick.



Many study abroad programs are relatively short—“a little moment out of the student’s real life,” adds Wick. Well-designed programs have very targeted learning objectives: In a couple of weeks, you can’t expect students to become fluent in a language or change significantly regarding cultural sensitivity. Such programs typically have more focused goals, such as providing students a more nuanced sense of their place in the world or gaining knowledge about a specific topic related to the country, like public health or architecture.

“If you start to look at all interactions with the student back to the first moment, you can be more bold in the learning you want to see occur through your relationship with the student,” says Wick. For instance, you may say that the learning objective for a trip to France is to understand how French culture influences the country’s political system. During the application process and pre-departure programming, students begin working toward that learning objective. When they finally board the plane for France, students are already at the midway point of learning.

“On most learning outcomes, you can get past the initial benchmarks before departure,” says Wick. “While students are abroad, they are in the ‘messy middle space’ of advancing milestones for learning. Then after they come home, you can help them apply their knowledge to a capstone project, honors thesis or post-program course. That’s how we can move students toward mastery [of material].”



FOSTERING

AN ENVIRONMENT FOR 'WHOLE STUDENT LEARNING'

At first glance, it may seem that engaging students early on, altering the advising and application process, and fostering whole student learning is a daunting task. However, Wick recommends a handful of steps that universities can take to transform the process.

- **Conduct a brainstorming session on the purpose of study abroad**

"It may seem like a funny exercise at first because of course we know the answer to that," says Wick. "But our first answers are usually not very good." They tend to be broad goals related to gaining perspective or cultural awareness. However, brainstorming and reflecting with staff, peer ambassadors and student returnees may yield more tangible purposes of study abroad centered on gaining financial, logistical management, interpersonal and navigational skills.



- **Broaden your perception on who the office impacts**

"If you structure your outreach, advising and application as learning tools, then you're having an educational impact on more of your students," says Wick. For instance, don't merely talk about the development of 110 students who went on 11 programs during the semester. Include the 500 students who went to informational sessions where they obtained tools for goal setting or received an introduction to the basics of intercultural competency.

- **Consider the concept of "inclusive excellence"**

"Re-centering on whole student learning involves looking at what they bring to the table and what they want to gain from the study abroad experience," says Wick. "When we ask these questions, we need to think about diversity, inclusion and equity." Create space to learn about the unique history and abilities of students so you can guide them along the path toward the most impactful learning. For example, not everyone is adept at writing a 5,000-word essay to describe their study abroad experience. Perhaps they can compose an introspective song that encompasses their experience.



- **Draft specific student learning objectives**

Use the results of your brainstorming session to create student learning objectives. Wick suggests this formula: "As a result of engagement with our office, students will know and be able to" Be as specific as possible, but think broadly about areas where learning occurs. For example, engineering students on a trip to the Mekong Delta in Vietnam can learn about more than developing a suitable infrastructure for the flood plain. They also can develop collaborative skills and learn how to manage stress in a group setting.

■ Track student learning

Wick recommends asking a question on the essay that can serve as a pre-test, such as what students think are the biggest challenges they will face abroad and how they will navigate them. During the trip, students can answer similar questions in a weekly journal. Then, upon returning home they can write another essay about the challenges faced and how they overcame them. The answers will help you “find out where powerful learning is happening for students, where they regularly see regression or which things don’t seem to contribute to their growth at all,” says Wick. “If you don’t track learning, you are left guessing [about the impact of your programs.]”

Overall, the process is about retooling what study abroad offices already do to make it more powerful, concludes Wick. “You have to gather some information from students when they apply, and most of the time you are making some decisions about applicants to ensure they are right for the program,” he says. “By reimagining how and when learning happens you can make choices that are more meaningful, beneficial and powerful for them and for you.”



David Wick has worked in international education since 1988. His experience includes leading study abroad efforts at a youth exchange organization, Arkansas State University, San Francisco State University and Santa Clara University. He is a Fulbright Scholar who participated in the 2011 International Education Administrators’ Program in India. Wick has held appointed and elected leadership roles for NAFSA: Association of International Educators, Diversity Abroad, Lessons From Abroad and the Forum on Education Abroad.



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