

International Education— So Much More Than Study Abroad

by Susan A. Bird



Educational opportunities overseas have mushroomed in the past five years. Study abroad programs themselves have expanded, embracing new geographic areas, academic disciplines, and program models. Other varieties of programs have gained widespread acceptance as legitimate components of an undergraduate education. Within the general framework of “experiential learning,” three growing categories of overseas opportunities are internships, service learning opportunities and work-abroad programs. This column will focus on internships, with subsequent issues devoted to service learning and work abroad.

Internships now form the second-largest category of overseas educational experience after study abroad. What constitutes an international internship? A working definition might be a credit-bearing or credit-worthy supervised work experience overseas which includes an academic component and is an integral part of the student’s undergraduate--or, less commonly--graduate curriculum.

Most internships are taken for credit, and they need to offer the possibility of obtaining credit. Internships are supervised, sometimes by a representative of the sponsoring college, and sometimes by a local coordinator, in addition to the site supervisor who directly oversees the intern’s work. Internships include an academic component to differentiate them from simple work abroad. This may be a special project, a paper, a journal, or any kind of assessment tool which the

sponsoring college approves. Internships form part of the student’s undergraduate or (rarely) graduate experience and are primarily a learning, not an earning process.

While most colleges today endorse the concept of study abroad, whether or not they are actively engaged in sponsoring programs, this enthusiasm is more muted for internships. There are a number of reasons for this. One is, certainly, that not all colleges offer locally-based internships for credit, much less overseas internships. Not all schools that do include U.S. internships in their curriculum allow the possibility for overseas internships. Establishing internships overseas is a lengthy and labor-intensive process, requiring on-going supervision and constant attention to developing new program sites, and many schools feel they lack the necessary resources. In addition, the mere fact of the distance from the home campus may make the student’s adviser hesitant to approve an internship taken abroad. Legitimate questions such as “how will you be supervised?” and “how will this work relate to your studies at home?” are often raised.

But students and many faculty members see the value of internships overseas, and schools have been successful in making overseas internships significantly more available and accepted than they were even five years ago. And just as one argument in favor of study abroad makes the point that studying and living in a country provides a very different experience from passing through as a tourist, there is

growing recognition that the experience of working in a country will give a student a very different viewpoint from that gained while studying in that country.

Experiential education of all varieties is likely to form part of an undergraduate career these days. And with increasing numbers of students either actively seeking jobs overseas after graduation, or working in multi-national corporations based in the U.S., the experience provided by an internship overseas may well give a student the edge in landing a job in a competitive market. One fairly average student at my former institution first studied in Paris. During a field trip to Brussels, she attended a lecture at the U.S. Embassy and learned about their internship program. She applied and was accepted for the following semester. From there, she was offered a contractual position at the U.S. Embassy in Greece. She remains firmly convinced that the internship pointed her along the road to success.

Why the student status? An intern is first and foremost a student and is assumed to be learning on the job. This category is useful in a number of respects. First, the preservation of student status means that the intern does not need working papers or a work permit; he or she can undertake the internship while on a student visa. The student is, properly, viewed as a student, not a worker.

The intern generally is not paid, and in fact, the student may pay a hefty

program fee to the sponsoring campus, including full-time tuition, a placement fee, room and board when these items are included. This may appear to be a disadvantage to the student, but it has the effect of freeing the student intern to take on roles that an employee could not. The intern can be assigned to (and can request) special projects and can develop a more direct relationship with both supervisors and co-workers than if he or she were moving up the employment ladder. This is not to say that there are never compensations for interns. In some internships, students receive a stipend to assist with living expenses, and they may be eligible for various benefits provided to bona fide employees: a transportation pass for metro or bus, meals in a highly subsidized company cafeteria at the work site; a small grant upon completion of the internship.

How do students locate internships? For advisers and students, researching opportunities for international internships when their institution does not itself offer such a program remains challenging. Michigan State University's publication "Directory of International Internships," edited by Charles Gliozzo et al, is an excellent reference guide. The vast majority of entries refer to internship programs run by colleges and universities. Internships, even more than study abroad programs, are subject to frequent change, with new sites added and others lapsing, so one is well-advised to phone a sponsoring institution and check on the current status of any internship listed.

A second question should be whether the internships are open to students from other schools. Many colleges and universities which offer internships restrict them to their own students. This may relate to the fact that it is difficult to accommodate the increasing number of requests from the home

campus, and the perceived difficulty of transferring internship credits. Other universities which have large internship programs actively market this service to students from other universities, as they have previously marketed their study abroad programs. Students and their advisers can consult the international internship directory named above, or examine program literature provided by sponsoring colleges/universities for guidelines and requirements. The UCI Center for International Education Newsletter, edited by Ruth Sylte, appears monthly in electronic form only and lists internship opportunities along with study and work experiences.

College-sponsored programs are augmented by the emergence of organizations which create internship opportunities for students. Students must arrange credit through their home institution, since the organizations are not credit-granting. WISE, run by Linda Greenberg in Philadelphia, and CAPA, run by John Christian in London, offer a large selection of internships to students. IGA (*Instituto Guatemalteco-Americano*) is typical of a small organization which has established internships but does very little to publicize the opportunities. People to People International offers internships for which credit is optional; if desired, it is granted by an affiliated university. My own organization, CIE, offers a menu of varied internships in London, where students are placed in work sites appropriate to their background and interest—anything from infant centers to fashion design is possible. Students can register through their home institution for credit, or again, credit can be granted through an affiliate institution.

Who is doing internships these days? Increasingly, internships are seen as an experience that students in many disciplines can take advantage of. When study abroad was more restricted to

students majoring in foreign languages, political science, and perhaps history, traditional internships might place a political science major in the office of a member of Parliament. Today's internships include a variety of innovative opportunities. The following listings were received in response to a request over SECUSS-L for unusual programs: Wright State University offers a FIPSE-funded internship in international business in Chile. Students first study for one semester in Santiago, then move south for a six-month internship to develop expertise in import/export skills. LSU offers a semester-long program in Japan for students of landscape architecture. The students work in a landscape architecture firm in Tokyo or elsewhere and carry out projects for credit course work which LSU has set up for this program. Princeton University offers internships in TESOL in a number of Asian countries, including Korea, Japan, and China. The Center for Global Education at Augsburg College offers programs in Namibia, "Women and Development" and "Societies in Transition" which include an internship component along with a study program.

Internships allow students to experience a foreign culture in a new way, to earn useful credits towards a career for the 21st century, and to provide practical work experience. Increasingly, it is feasible for almost any student to participate in this innovative learning setting. □

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