

# Views from Study Abroad



by

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As a representative of the Study Abroad community, it is my hope that this column will serve to further the common interests of all of us in the field of international education. It is intended to be a forum rather than a platform, and one which will benefit from contributions from a list of seasoned study abroad practitioners, including past chairs of SECUSSA, (NAFSA's Section on U.S. Students Abroad) and SAUSS (AACRAO's Study Abroad for U.S. Students).

As one who has chaired both groups, I've observed a tendency to see as totally different operations the evaluation of foreign credentials presented by incoming international students seeking U.S. degrees, and the documents resulting from the relatively short-term or "visiting student" experiences of our U.S. undergraduates in countries other than our own.

Although I would stop short of calling these two aspects of international education two sides of the same coin, I know that many of us who work in international admissions, credential evaluation and study abroad share common concerns related to foreign educational systems. Thus it's particularly appropriate for us to bring them together now in *World Education News & Reviews*.

### *A Common Bond...*

Perhaps our principal common bond is our need to understand educational systems that are different

from our own and work with them and within them to suit very specific ends. This includes a need to find ways to translate these systems into some sort of measurable compatibility with each other. In study abroad, we can see this most clearly when we attempt to expose American students to the ultimate challenge for an undergraduate: direct enrollment at a foreign university. In fact, it has been the fallout from these attempts that has resulted in the development of the multiple approaches to overseas study on many U.S. campuses, in many instances a highly dynamic and creative enterprise.

### *The Dilemma...*

It is at this point, however, that the dilemma of study abroad becomes apparent. On most campuses where study abroad programs exist, there is support at the highest levels for the underlying goals of broadening students through an international experience. At the same time, there is a tacit assumption that these programs are exposing students to an academic experience comparable to the one available on the home campus.

In order to appreciate the nature of this dilemma, it may be useful to look at study abroad from a historical perspective.

For the deans and departmental advocates of an overseas sojourn, the greatest value for their students lay in the developing of an awareness of other cultures that could be gained from a year

of living in another system. As noted earlier, unlike the incoming foreign student to our universities and colleges, most Americans studying abroad have not been seeking a degree.

In fact, in the period immediately following WWII, the emphasis in overseas study was still primarily at the graduate level. This was most often facilitated by a prestigious fellowship that provided an academic rationale for adventure, desired cultural enhancement, guided maturation, even "polish." Most of the original participants represented an intellectual elite. Most studied--and still study--in Western Europe.

Understandably, it was not long before undergraduate Americans became more adventurous, branching out from the overseas experience after graduation to one that could be included as part of an undergraduate degree program. This required a new perspective on the part of the sending institutions. Unfortunately, what was not always understood clearly was that the very differences that made other cultures so valuable and interesting for American students were not just political, social, linguistic or geographic: these differences also impacted on the academic structure at the university level. They directly affected the subjects that were available for study, how they could be studied, when they could be studied and by whom.

Furthermore, all of these components could vary a good deal from one country

or continent to another. U.S. students seeking an educational experience compatible with their American academic goals in a more exotic setting than Smalltown, U.S.A. ran into some unexpected problems--not just the ones related to foreign language proficiency and generalized culture shock. Advisors of these intrepid souls realized, usually from unhappy letters home worrying about academic credit, that their own lack of knowledge about the workings of the foreign university could be seriously jeopardizing these goals; their students seemed to be having an inordinate amount of difficulty in matching up their academic needs with what was available abroad.

### *The Response...*

The original "junior year abroad" programs were created in response to this problem by a few thoughtful, knowledgeable institutions well in advance of the large post-war wave of study abroad. These programs, designed for advanced language students, addressed the need to "mesh" foreign course content, academic levels and foreign language demands with the home campus requirements and existing skills of undergraduate study abroaders. They were structured to combine an intensive, on-site advanced language review with cultural orientation, followed by an academic year of regular local university offerings and a few special courses created for the group.

While this model and its variants addressed the academic issues to the satisfaction of the sending institution(s), it created a new problem: it removed the American students from the mainstream of regular host university student life. More careful attention to academic "fit" made it possible for programs to have larger numbers of American students with fewer academic problems. At the same time, cultural experiences became less spontaneous, as Americans tended to stick together.

While the question of academic credit for group study abroad in these early years has not been analyzed per se, I suspect that in many cases the law of least resistance prevailed. While most credit was awarded thoughtfully and responsibly, and some institutions required that their own students accept grades based on the foreign university grading practices, other found it necessary to take a more lenient approach under a variety of pressures. Not the least of these was the difficulty in obtaining any grades at all for students who were only "visitors" in systems in which a whole academic career was evaluated by a final examination at its very end.

As the late Lily von Klemperer always reminded us, in the field of study abroad there are many different types of students with many different needs. That holds true for institutions as well. And while up to this point we have focused upon academic issues, there are many other factors that

must be given equal weight in advising students and creating study abroad programs.

### *A More Dangerous World...*

The world has become a more complicated and dangerous place in which to live and travel. Programs which in the past could send students without a resident director or accompanying faculty member must now balance the added cost factor against the risk factor.

### *Greater Demands by Students...*

Today's career-minded students are less flexible and more demanding of what a program should deliver, particularly in the face of escalating costs; the opportunity to become part of another culture and grow through new challenges and adventures is not enough to override local difficulties and bad teaching, particularly for students without strong foreign language skills and pre-departure preparation.

The fact remains that study abroad is an endlessly changing and developing field. No study abroad advisor ever stops hoping to find the "perfect" program--"perfect" being, of course, perfect for the particular needs and goals of his/her students and home institution. This returns us to the dilemma of which we spoke earlier: the need to design programs abroad which combine the exposure to new cultural values--the basis for programming abroad in the first place--with

course work comparable to what is offered on the home campus in order for students to be able to earn up to a full year's credit toward their undergraduate degrees. It also seems fairly clear that when the cost of study abroad is borne by students and their parents, careful attention to both of the above ingredients is vital.

### *No longer for the Privileged Few...*

Study abroad is now considered to be a necessary element in the institutional profile of most universities and colleges in the U.S. No longer the province of a privileged few, literally thousands of study abroad programs and program types now span the globe.

As more U.S. institutions face the need to internationalize their students, more students will need to find a way to study abroad. Most campuses admit they should be sending double or triple the current numbers overseas. The problem is finding a responsible way to do this.

Before more study abroad programming takes place, however, institutions should carefully consider their needs and goals and explore existing options and models. This column will hopefully provide some guidance in this respect by evaluating program types by region in future issues, focusing upon the dualism inherent in study abroad: the need to provide both a culturally rewarding and academically valid overseas experience for the American undergraduate.