

our view

What's It
All About?

*sixth in a series;
generating thoughts and
discussion in the
study abroad community*

cīee

This is the sixth in a series of **“food for thought”** pieces from CIEE. The themes vary but all deal with **study abroad for U.S. undergraduates**. We present our ideas not as the only viable ones but rather **to stimulate discourse** in furtherance of the study abroad enterprise. Previous topics include “How Are We Doing?”, which addresses student goals and awareness; “Standards” in study abroad; “A CIEE Eye for the Study Abroad Guy...or Girl” which discusses dress, attitudes, and behavior of students which affects their cultural engagement abroad; “Parents, Pills, & Pandering” which deals with Millennial Generation parents, the reality of prescribed medication today, and how study abroad is, and should be, different than a semester at college here in the U.S.; and “A Research Agenda for Study Abroad” which stresses the importance of systematically exploring questions related to student learning abroad, and identifying four research projects that CIEE will undertake. We **welcome your comments and requests** for additional copies at any time to **editor@ciee.org**.

Time was, not so long ago, that U.S. students went abroad and little was made of what they were learning. A descendant of the nineteenth-century European Grand Tour, study abroad was until recently still viewed as a sort of finishing-school experience that benefited the sons and daughters of the well-heeled. Like the heroes and heroines of Henry James' novels, yesterday's study abroad participants went to Paris, Florence, and other well-traveled destinations to learn... interesting if not entirely useful things. Nobody thought much about whether students were meeting learning goals or objectives. It was simply assumed that they would learn a foreign language and "get some culture" while abroad. Left largely to their own devices, students learned what they could. When they returned to the home campus, little if any effort was made to assess what they had in fact learned.

Truth is, this approach didn't work all that badly. Students who took part in these "grand tours" were generally intelligent, reasonably motivated, and inclined to spend enough time in the culture to gain a reasonable amount of perspective and linguistic facility. Programs abroad provided worthwhile learning opportunities for the small, relatively homogeneous populations attending those programs. Over time, more schools became interested in offering similar opportunities to a much broader range of students, and the numbers of participants rose. The expanded diversity of audience, the increased opportunities to reside in a sea of Americans abroad, and the change in academic and institutional motivations should have sounded an alarm that the assumptions and methods of old were no longer appropriate for 21st century programs. Some heeded the warning and adapted, but some did not.

Experience has taught us that students abroad can and sometimes do acquire the sorts of knowledge,

skills, perspectives, and values needed to live and work in what the CIEE mission statement calls our “globally interdependent and culturally diverse world.” We take seriously the reports of students who tell us they learned things abroad that they wouldn’t have learned had they stayed on the home campus. However, we also believe that too many U.S. students fail to learn anything abroad that even approaches what they might learn through enrolling in more thoughtfully planned programs. Put simply, the potential of study abroad for preparing students for life after graduation is all too often not being met.

While it’s easy to blame problems or failure to achieve desired outcomes on the students, it’s also clear that too few programs are designed and delivered with student learning in mind—including strategies for engaging under-motivated students. Too many programs assume that students will learn

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through contact with an abstract “other culture.” These programs fail to focus on what knowledge and skills students are expected to acquire through that exposure, or how they will go about doing so. When dropped with little or no support into “the deep end” of the new culture—the practice of too many existing direct matriculation programs—students all too often either drown outright or learn to dog-paddle over to the shallow end where it’s safe, but where learning is less than optimal. When students are prevented from even getting into the pool—the approach of many “American Island” programs that isolate and hold them apart from the local culture—they fail to learn to swim at all.

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Let's think about what students ought to get out of studying abroad—an opportunity that holds out all sorts of promise to students—so long as they enroll in programs that meet several basic conditions.

First, program design and delivery need to focus squarely on student learning. Programs should be reverse engineered—those who design them should begin by identifying learning objectives, and only then move to identify the countries, courses, activities, and support that will give students the best chance to meet those objectives. Programs should also require each group of incoming students to

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identify their personal learning goals prior to departure. Then, facilitated conversations on-site allows students to reflect on their and the program's goals, and to adjust their behavior accordingly. Students who enroll in a program that aims to provide them with opportunities to develop their language and intercultural skills through, say, structured community service, need opportunities to reflect on whether they're meeting their goals. Without reflecting on their own learning, students can easily fail to achieve some of the things that are most important to them.

Second, programs need to provide students with opportunities to meaningfully engage people in the host culture and should be the *sine qua non* of any study abroad experience. Without meaningfully integrating students, a program offers them little more than what they get out of classes at home: learning based on theory rather than practice, on abstract ideas and concepts instead of active engagement.

Well-designed study abroad programs should offer opportunities for students to become actively involved with people whose ideas, beliefs, values, and behavior differ from theirs, sometimes dramatically. When students study another language abroad, the structure or vocabulary they have learned in class is immediately reinforced when they leave the classroom and interact with people who actually speak the language. Similarly, a student who learns about a political system in another country can learn it in a more immediate and personal way while abroad. The program can encourage or require him or her to have conversations with locals about political issues and parties, and to read or listen to political commentary in local newspapers or on the evening news.

Students can of course benefit from being exposed to ideas, art, and artifacts that are situated within their original context. Civil engineering students enrolled in a two-week, faculty-led program that explores the theory and practice of bridge building in three Eastern European countries, comparing these to U.S. approaches, may provide a valuable field experience. English majors can no doubt benefit through enrolling in a short-term program that allows them to attend several Shakespeare plays at the Globe. We acknowledge that such experiences can have value. However, to equate the soupçon of study abroad that takes place in this type of short-term effort with a semester or year abroad in a highly integrated study abroad program is comparing apples to oranges. While there is a place for both, we shouldn't put them into the same bin where student learning is concerned. Each approach fills a need—and each needs to be designed, executed, and evaluated within its own context.

Third, a program needs to provide direct experience with the local academic culture. Students need to understand that academic life at the site is part and parcel of the broader culture they are adapting to. They need to learn that the assumptions, policies, activities, and behavior of students, faculty,

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and administrators at local universities are conditioned by the same cultural forces that inform other aspects of local life. This is true whether the program enrolls students in one or more local universities for all of their courses, or enrolls them exclusively in specially designed courses taught by faculty from a local university.

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Our experience has taught us that it is not easy to lead students to appreciate the differences they encounter in academic settings in other countries. The puzzling ways that professors act in class—to choose a common complaint—requires interpretation within the broader cultural context. Students frequently take such difference as evidence that local academic life is deeply flawed when compared to how things are done at home. We think it is critically important that students come to appreciate that the new academic life they are experiencing is deeply embedded in the wider culture. When they begin to see that much of the knowledge on offer reflects broader cultural values, they may begin to understand that much of the knowledge they've acquired at home is also culturally based—one of the most important lessons study abroad can provide. If they return to the U.S. with some understanding that difference isn't automatically wrong, and that “the way it's done here” isn't always right, they'll have learned an important lesson through studying abroad.

Fourth, an effective program needs a resident director who has been carefully selected and trained, and whose formal academic training and experience are appropriate to the program. The director and other staff on-site play a critical role in coordinating and in some ways shaping the various aspects of the student experience. The types of support that on-site staff deliver, including the many ways that they intervene in the academic, intercultural, and personal lives of the students, go a long way toward determining whether students succeed in meeting program and personal goals. We should not confuse previous academic training with competence. Much of the work of the resident director focuses on student services and administrative skills, which are not included in the curriculum of most Ph.D. programs.

Fifth, a program at a site where English is not the native language should provide students with the tools they need to make reasonable progress in learning a second language, even if only at a beginning level. There is a lot of talk these days about Americans learning a second language. While we think this goal is noble, and while we think that students often learn a foreign language abroad more effectively and efficiently than they do in classrooms on their home campuses, we shouldn't kid ourselves. Despite claims to the contrary, most programs are simply not able to provide opportunities for students to become "fluent" in a second language. Achieving advanced second language proficiency requires learners to commit well beyond a single study abroad experience. Our experience has shown us that pro-

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grams in non-English language locations can, when well-designed and delivered, provide language learning experiences that enrich and enhance student second language skills, and enhance understanding of the broader culture. It is also clear that study abroad can provide practice and progress toward significant proficiency if a student has significant prior language education. But second language proficiency is only one piece of cultural understanding—it's not the whole meal. Cultural understanding can be achieved without achieving mastery of a language, and programs must be designed with this in mind.

Sixth, it is imperative that we measure how we're doing, over and over again. Effective program evaluations should be systematic, independent, and transparent. Like those cholesterol commercials on

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TV, unless there's a test, it's impossible to know the actual level of results. Evaluation results should be publicly posted so prospective students and others can judge for themselves whether high standards are being met. It is worth reflecting on the fact that most existing study abroad programs were developed and are now operated without the benefit of either systematic evaluation or assessment of student learning. While this might not be possible for every institution and program, evaluation and assessment should become more the norm over the next decade than the exception.

So what should students expect to get out of programs that are designed and delivered with these minimum qualities in mind? Students, like the administrators and faculty who send them abroad,

come to study abroad with a broad range of legitimate learning goals in mind. The needs and interests of sociology majors can and usually do differ from those of engineering, business, or language students. At the same time, however, we also believe that there is a core of learning goals that all study abroad programs should incorporate—goals that students of any academic background will need to pursue in preparing themselves for life after graduation.

Students abroad need to develop the intercultural skills, perspectives, and values that will allow them to work and communicate effectively with a wide variety of people whose values and beliefs are often different from their own. The challenges they face in their careers, whatever their field, will require global solutions. Students need to develop the capacity to be open to new ideas and possibilities, even when they are advanced by people who come from very different cultural backgrounds. Students also need to acquire new, or improve existing, second language abilities. Americans who have not experienced what it means to acquire at least some proficiency in a foreign language will be at increas-

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ing risk of being marginalized in their careers, even if they never leave the U.S. We believe that the success today's students will enjoy in their future careers, including their degree of international mobility, will increasingly depend on their ability to achieve functional skills in a second language. Where the U.S. is concerned, English alone is ok to get by, but not for providing global leadership.

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Students can, when possible, broaden their understanding of their own discipline through enrolling in one or more courses in their major while abroad.

Students also need to develop global awareness: knowledge about the geography, culture, arts, history, politics, and economics of another region of the world. Students need such interdisciplinary knowledge about another region in order to move beyond the confining perspectives of their own time and place. Students can, when possible, broaden their understanding of their own discipline through enrolling in one or more courses in their major while abroad. Exposure to the discipline that they study at home, viewed through the lens of a new culture, can itself contribute to the development of intercultural and global awareness. And we can't resist noting that faculty and administrators at home institutions should, in making decisions about credit transfer, expect that courses taken abroad will ideally complement, rather than simply replace, those that a student can take at home.

Study abroad educators face significant challenges in educating a variety of stakeholders—students themselves, parents, faculty and advisors, employers—about the potential value of study abroad. Recent research indicates that while the CEOs of many companies praise the value of studying in other countries, campus recruiters and human resources professionals at those same companies often show no preference for study abroad experience in hiring and promoting employees. While increasing numbers of parents seem to understand that study abroad is important, the fact that less than 2% of U.S. undergraduates now earn credit abroad

suggests that a lot of parents still don't understand the critically important role that study abroad can play in the education of their sons and daughters. How many U.S. foreign language and area studies faculty believe their majors need to spend at least a semester abroad in order to be well educated? Study abroad needs effective advocacy supported by empirical data to convince these stakeholders that a 21st century education needs to include at least a semester at a study abroad program designed with student learning in mind.



editor@ciee.org • www.ciee.org • 1.800.407.8839

CIEE: Council on International Educational Exchange
7 Custom House Street
3rd Floor
Portland, ME 04101

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