

Clear Advantages to Studying Abroad: So Why Aren't Students Enrolling?

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Abstract

Today's employers are looking for graduates who possess technical skills, work effectively in teams, think critically and communicate effectively, especially across cultures in addition to other qualities. One of the most important skills a person needs in order to be successful in today's global economy is understanding and working with different cultures. To begin to understand cultural differences, it is important to have cultural training and to experience another culture in that particular country. One of the best ways for students to experience another culture is to take part in a study abroad course and to immerse themselves in another country's traditions and customs. The Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Fellowship Study Abroad Program Report concluded, "What nations don't know can hurt them. The stakes involved in study abroad are that simple, that straightforward, and that important. For their own future and that of the nation, college graduates today must be internationally competent."⁵

Not only should graduates be internationally competent, research indicates links between studying abroad and improved graduation rates, as well as employability.¹³ While the total number of students in the US studying abroad is still relatively low, at approximately 10% of the total student population, this number is actually at all-time high, which also takes into account students at community colleges. Another study, *Gaining an Employment Edge: The Impact of Study Abroad on 21st Century Skills and Career Perspectives*, indicated that with "study abroad there was a positive impact on the development of a wide range of the 21st century skills, expands career possibilities, and has a long-term impact on career progression and promotion."¹⁴ Currently, at the author's institution 9% of the total enrollment studies abroad. This number is close to the national average of 10%, however, in the School of Engineering and Technology only 1.8% of the total student population currently studies abroad. Why are the national numbers so low and even much lower in Engineering and Technology?

This paper will explore what employers are looking for in graduates, how can study abroad help students achieve success, and the benefits of studying abroad for both the employer and the student. The paper will look at some reasons why students might not take advantage of study abroad programs and what can be done to change the attitudes of faculty and students on the value of studying abroad to increase the preparedness of students for a career in the 21st Century.

What are Employers Looking for in Graduates?

Employers are looking for best candidates to fill their positions, however they want more than just technical skills. Most employers are looking for graduates with the necessary skills needed for the particular job requirements, in addition they are also looking for added “soft skills,” which are considered as important as the technical skills. According to a study by Hansen and Hansen, these soft skills include: communication (listening, written, and verbal); analytical/research abilities; computer/technical literacy; flexibility/adaptability/managing multiple priorities; interpersonal abilities; leadership/management aptitudes; multicultural sensitivity/awareness; planning/organizing; problem-solving/reasoning/creativity; and team work¹¹. The desire for these soft skills were confirmed as something employers sought in other studies conducted in Europe, such as: professionalism; reliability; ability to cope with uncertainty; work under pressure; capability to communicate and interact with others, either in teams or through networking; good written and verbal communication; information and communication technology skills; creativity and self-confidence; good self-management and time-management; and willingness to learn and accept responsibility.^{3, 20, 21, 26} A 2011 study conducted through the Corporate Member Council (CMC) of the American Society for Engineering Education (ASEE) concluded that employers are looking for the following attributes in engineers: engineering science fundamentals of mathematics (including statistics); engineering; context in which engineering is practiced; communication; teamwork; leadership; flexibility; curiosity and desire to learn - for life; ethical standards and professionalism.¹² There are a number of soft skills included in the attributes of a global engineer. Together all of these research studies have reoccurring soft skill themes: multicultural awareness; interacting with others; team work; responsibility; leadership; and communication, just to name a few.

Over the years, there has been a “delicate balance” between institutions of higher education and groups who feel that they should have a say in the higher educational processes, for example, state commissions of higher education, legislatures, and industry employers. Many of these have given their opinions or enacted legislation to change various aspects of higher education to suit their desires. It should not be a surprise to learn that according to the 2014 Gallup-Lumina Foundation survey one third, 34% of business leaders disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “higher education institutions in this country are graduating students with the skills and competences that my business needs.”¹⁰ Roughly one third, 34% were neutral and the remaining, 32% agreed and strongly agreed. Implications are that, “There is a disconnect between what business leaders need and what higher education institutions think they are producing.”¹⁰ The question in higher education, especially in the technical fields like engineering and engineering technology, is how to fit more into an already full curriculum, which will enable a student to complete a program in four years. While it may be impossible to completely indulge industry and business with all of the soft skills they require for their employees, it is possible to provide students an advantage by encouraging them to take a study abroad course.

In the study, *Gaining an Employment Edge: The Impact of Study Abroad on 21st Century Skills and Career Perspectives*, “A majority of respondents reported that their study abroad experience helped develop or improve intercultural skills, curiosity, flexibility & adaptability, confidence, and self-awareness to a significant degree. About half of respondents felt that study abroad

helped increase their interpersonal skills, communication, problem solving, language skills, tolerance for ambiguity, and course or major-related knowledge to a significant degree. Study abroad participants also improved their teamwork, leadership, and work ethic, but to a lesser degree than other skills.”¹⁴ These are all soft skills that industry and business want their employees to possess.

How do Students Benefit from Study Abroad?

A report published by the Institute of International Education (IIE) and supported by the American Institute for Foreign Study (AIFS) Foundation titled, *Study Abroad Matters: Linking Higher Education to Contemporary Workplace Through International Experiences*, indicated that study abroad is a win-win for institutions, schools, or programs looking for a solution to help students find jobs after graduation.¹³ Study abroad helps develop skills in students’ that employers are seeking such as: communication, teamwork, and punctuality.¹⁴ In addition, the study abroad experience helped to significantly develop or improve students’ intercultural skills, flexibility and adaptability, self-awareness, curiosity, and confidence.¹⁴ Moreover, study abroad improves interpersonal, communication, and problem-solving skills to some degree.¹⁸

The Institute of International Education, *Gaining an Employment Edge: The Impact of Study Abroad on 21st Century Skills and Career Perspectives*, found that, “study abroad has an overall positive impact on the development of a wide range of 21st century skills, expands career possibilities, and has a long-term impact on career progression and promotion.”¹⁴ This study surveyed over 4,500 alumni of U. S. colleges and universities that took part in some form of study abroad between the years 1999 and 2017, 70% of the respondents said “that their study abroad experience helped to significantly develop or improve their intercultural skills, flexibility and adaptability, self-awareness, curiosity, and confidence.”¹⁴ In addition, the majority of respondents said, “that study abroad helped to cultivate their interpersonal, communication, and problem-solving skills to some degree.”¹⁴

The American Institute for Foreign Study (AIFS) report is a study of 1,600 AIFS study abroad alumni from 1990 to 2010. This report describes how their alumni regard the impact of their study abroad experiences. One key finding indicated that 58% of 2,700 respondents said that “developing skills and intercultural competencies which contributed to obtaining my first job after graduation.”¹ Another 86% of the alumni responded that study abroad helped them adapt to diverse workplace environments.¹ In addition, this survey revealed that 85% of all respondents agreed that “studying abroad with AIFS was the most meaningful experience of my undergraduate education. Over one-third (34%) of alumni reported that studying abroad contributed to their choice of field of employment; two-thirds (65%) reported that it contributed to “the importance they place on working in a field that they find interesting”; and 70% reported that it was a factor contributing to “the importance placed on having personal fulfillment in my work.”¹

The *Gaining an Employment Edge: The Impact of Study Abroad on 21st Century Skills & Career Prospect in the United States*, report stated that study abroad programs had a positive impact

on participants careers. The report also indicated while, “long term study abroad programs had the greatest impact on job offers and skill development, but all forms of international experience provided value and enriched student’s lives.”¹⁴ In addition, the report said that. “Short-term study abroad programs, for instance, helped students to develop teamwork skills, a highly desirable trait in today’s job market.¹⁴ Indicating that for students who cannot participate in a long-term option, the short-term study abroad is a good opportunity for those who might want to develop their team and leadership skills. The IIE report found that study abroad had a strong benefit for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) majors who participated in an academic track outside of their major during their study abroad experience. Nearly half of STEM majors – 48 percent – who participated in a study abroad experience outside of their major reported that study abroad contributed to a job offer. By comparison, only 28 percent of science majors who participated in a science-focused study abroad program reported that the experience contributed to a job offer.¹⁴ STEM students indicated that soft skills were most developed in study abroad programs unrelated to their major. During interviews for the study, “STEM students described study abroad as an opportunity to explore different fields and practice skills that their academic programs at home largely did not address. These interviewees often described study abroad as one of the only opportunities during their undergraduate studies to develop skills like flexibility, written and verbal communication, interpersonal skills, and intercultural skills. It is also these kinds of “soft” skills that respondents working in STEM fields commented using and valuing most from their study abroad experiences, often mentioning that technical skills were developed well at their home campus, but the skills developed during study abroad have given them an edge in their careers.”¹⁴ In addition to obtaining skills already mentioned, students also report study abroad as being a transformative experience and a crucial turning point in life both personal and professional. Study abroad builds confidence, independence, responsibility, resilience and adaptability skills, as well as cultural diversity.

How do Organization Benefit from Study Abroad?

In 1998, Daimler-Benz A.G. and Chrysler Corporation agreed to one of the largest mergers in automotive history. Nevertheless, this merger revealed major culture clashes between the two organizations and the results were major problems with the merger with the resignation of several top American executives. Corporate officials from both organizations overestimated the extent of the culture problems between the two groups. This example illustrates that unless corporate officials are equipped to handle real culture clashes, such as the one with this merger, by working with their employees on cross cultural issues these types of dilemmas will continue to take a toll on organizations. This merger did not last. What started as a \$36 billion merger ended in 2007 for \$7.4 billion, a huge loss. This problem should have been foreseen.¹⁷

In today’s global economy, it is essential that a successful organization include contact with foreign countries, cultures and peoples.⁸ Therefore, employers continue to look for employees that possess cultural understanding, among other soft skills. Study abroad can serve as a form of cross-cultural training. Study abroad can widen a student’s cultural understanding.⁸ Undoubtedly, employers would be looking for graduates who possess these types of skills.

What can Educators do to Encourage Study Abroad?

What dissuades students interest in studying abroad? Some say it is us, we are the enemy. Most institutions have a low-level commitment to internationalization. It should be located in the university's mission statement or as a priority in the strategic plan. While a majority of faculty and students may support the effort to study abroad, they often fail to participate in the activities.²³

As educators, counselors, and administrators we should find ways to encourage students to enhance the soft skills discussed in this paper while they are in college, which have proven to benefit graduate's future careers. Often in engineering and engineering technology, we advise our students only towards their technical programs and not towards soft skilled courses that could benefit their career. Capretz and Ahmed contend that the oversight of soft skills in their field of software engineering is because soft skills are related to social and personality factors.⁴ Capretz and Ahmed concluded, "technical people tend to overlook the importance of soft skills as it is unrelated to their technical area and because their training is in dealing with the technical issue; thus, considering the soft skills in the software development process to be foreign to them, since the field deals with human factors and touches social sciences. Therefore, human aspects of software engineering are important subjects to teach, study and research. We urge software engineers to take on this challenge."⁴ This statement can apply to all types of engineering and engineering technology programs. Faculty should be encouraging engineering and engineering technology students to take a study abroad course. As indicated in the IIE Gaining an Employment Edge report, a STEM student benefited more from a study abroad opportunity when the subject matter was not in the STEM field, where the student had a chance to learn some of the soft skills employers find valuable.¹⁴

Nationally, while the overall number of students participating in study abroad has increased over the past two decades, it is evident that it is difficult for students to navigate the international education choices in program focus, destination, duration, participant preparation and ideal outcome they would like to see.⁹ Faculty and advisors need to assist students in finding the right program focus, duration, and destination that will complement their educational portfolio. Findings by Douglas and Jones-Rikkens indicated that, "students who are willing to study abroad in a cultural climate that differs significantly from their personal cultural experience benefit most from study abroad programs."⁸ In addition, "Students increase their worldmindedness as they move beyond their comfort zone and explore cultures and peoples who differ significantly from themselves and their personal experiences."⁸ Worldmindedness can lead to organizational effectiveness and career success.⁶

Conclusion and Recommendations

Currently graduates are entering an ever-increasing global workforce. It is evident that employers are looking for graduates that work effectively in teams, think critically, and communicate across cultures. These skills can be learned through a study abroad experience. Study abroad courses come in all sizes -- short and long; lasting an academic year, semester; several weeks, or as short as just one week. Most universities and schools offer scholarships to encourage students to study abroad.

The cost of studying abroad can be minimal, however, the rewards can be enormous. At the author's institution average cost of a semester study abroad program is \$6,439, the average cost of a summer program is \$4,026, and the average cost of a spring break program is \$3,188. The authors' school offers eight different study abroad course. The average cost for a spring break program is \$3,120 and average cost for a summer study abroad course is \$3,572. These costs do not include tuition and normal fees. While there are expenses associated with study abroad, students should be encouraged to commit to participating in this life changing experience.

Study abroad is an investment that students can make in their personal, academic, and professional future. Even though short-term study abroad programs have been criticized in the past for being academically light, the short programs are appealing to many students who have never traveled abroad or lack the funds for longer stays.^{7, 16, 19, 24, 25} Short term programs can serve as a vehicle for future travel for these students and can be the only path to studying abroad for students with little resources and in rigorous programs, such as engineering and technology.⁹ Short term programs can be offered during spring break or in the summer, which may fit better in programs of study. These types of study abroad programs can run anywhere from one to six weeks abroad.

There are numerous study abroad programs for students to select. At the authors' institution there are more than 200 programs. The cost for studying abroad can be low based on what a student gains from the experience.

In order for educators to move the needle forward on the number of students studying abroad, faculty and advisors have to commit to informing students on the benefits of studying abroad and encourage them to do so. The 2018 Institute of International Education, *Study Abroad Matters: Linking Higher Education to Cotemporary Workplace Through International Experiences* report recommends:

- (1) Educating students about the benefits of studying abroad in their first-year orientation is imperative. Students should be aware of their opportunities early so that they can manage a study abroad course into their plan of study and be more intentional about the type of program that would better match their desire learning outcomes.¹³
- (2) Universities, colleges, schools and programs should discuss with their industry partners, about the value of study abroad and the job performance enhancing skills that students

learn while studying abroad. In addition, promoting and expanding internship programs abroad is especially beneficial for students.¹³

- (3) STEM programs should encourage international experiences as part of the curriculum for their students because of the nature of their future jobs. STEM graduates especially should be prepared for a global workforce.¹³
- (4) Universities, colleges, schools and programs should encourage all students from all backgrounds, especially those that are underrepresented, to study abroad.¹³

Furthermore, universities, colleges, schools and programs should provide additional scholarship funding to students specifically for studying abroad. It is up to all faculty to see the benefits of studying abroad for the students and to encourage students to the next step.

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