



AMERICAN INSTITUTE
FOR FOREIGN STUDY

AIFS STUDENT GUIDE TO

Study Abroad & Career Development

By: Martin Tillman



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The goal of this Guide is to provide students with a framework to understand the impact and added value of study abroad for their career development. Regardless of duration or destination, we believe students will benefit from considering the career implications of their decision to study abroad.

Contents

- 1 The Career Implications of Study Abroad
- 2 The Career Connection – Do Employers Value Study Abroad Experience?
- 4 Deciding to Study Abroad in a Purposeful Way
- 5 Taking Advantage of Career Connections While Abroad
- 7 Upon Return to Campus: How to Effectively Market Your Study Abroad Experience to Employers
- 8 Strengthening Your Career Toolkit: Articulating Newly Acquired Skills & Competencies

The Career Implications of Study Abroad

Study abroad is one of the most exciting and challenging experiences you will have during your college years. It may be the first time you will live in another culture, travel internationally, or learn a foreign language. It has the potential to provide you with a fresh outlook and unique perspective on a career you've been thinking about after graduation. However, even if your career goals are not clear, studying abroad has the potential to clarify the direction you'd like to take, give you a new perspective on your academic work, and strengthen skills that will be of benefit to you when you begin your job search in your senior year.

Given the widely accepted impact of globalization on the U.S. economy and in light of the new skills in demand by businesses, nonprofits, and government, it's to your advantage to consider the career implications of what may be a once-in-a-lifetime educational experience. Study abroad will provide a singular opportunity for you to set yourself apart from other job seekers and to build valuable new intercultural skills and competencies.

Global political and economic forces are re-shaping, if not adding a new dimension to, the rationale for study abroad.

Too often, campus efforts to “internationalize” focus on the academic logistics of supporting study abroad opportunities. There is not always a careful and intentional approach taken to providing an integrated effort to harmonize student support services – principally between the study abroad and career service offices – to guide a student on the best way to make their decision to study abroad and become aware of how the experience may impact their career development.

To maximize the potential value of study abroad, we think it's essential that you make the decision to study abroad with a sense of purposefulness as you and your family weigh the costs and consider the type of program and the location. For example, how will the experience be integrated into your major or field of study? Provide immersion in language study? Outside the classroom, what options are there for experiential learning through volunteering or an internship? Are there alumni living and working in the host city whom you can meet to discuss your career interests? We think you should discuss these and many other questions either with a study abroad advisor or career services counselor.

While you may not have a clear career direction at the time you decide to study abroad, research shows that the experience is viewed as very important years later in shaping career mobility and influencing the choice of graduate study or work abroad.

So let's get started in helping you think through the decision you're about to make

and how best to take advantage of this unique opportunity to study in another part of the world!

The Career Connection – Do Employers Value Study Abroad Experience?

This may not be obvious, but the answer is, Yes, they do! Of course, if you're planning to work for an international NGO or a multinational corporation, your international experiences may well be part of the job description and overall requirements for employment. But, in most cases, regardless of the sector or field, there are important tangible benefits to your study abroad experience—particularly if you understand how best to market your skills and competencies.

“What do international employers really look for in employees and what skills will be needed by professionals to perform successfully in the global marketplace? A study commissioned by the College Placement Council Foundation surveyed 32 international employers and colleges to determine what international employers seek in prospective employees. The three most important skills were cognitive skills, social skills, and “personal traits.” Problem-solving ability, decision making, and knowing how to learn are highly prized generic skills. Social skills were described as the ability to work effectively in group settings, particularly with diverse populations. Personal traits mentioned frequently included flexibility, adaptability, and the capacity to be innovative.”

—Duke University Career Center

Job applicants with international experience will stand out for many reasons, including the following:

- Today's global marketplace demands increased adaptability, cross-cultural sensitivity, political awareness, and intellectual flexibility
- Globalization's impact on workers and the workplace has leaped across national borders and transcends cultures
- Employers, especially those doing business internationally, are interested in whether or not a job applicant demonstrates they have developed the requisite skills and sensitivity that make them stand out as the strongest candidate for a particular job

Numerous studies confirm the value that employers place upon applicants who have international experience. But what employers are specifically looking for

are candidates who have articulated the lessons that were learned and the intercultural and interpersonal skills that were strengthened as a result of studying abroad.

For example, in a widely cited study conducted by the RAND Corporation in 2003, there were five characteristics shown to make a successful career professional in an international corporation:

- General cognitive skills (problem solving, analytic ability)
- Interpersonal and relationship skills
- Tolerance for ambiguity and adaptability
- Cross-cultural competency (ability to work well in different cultures and with people from different backgrounds)
- Personal traits (*e.g. character, self-reliance, dependability*)

It's easy to see why time spent studying abroad (especially if the country is in the non-Western world where the challenges are greater in terms of language and culture differences) can provide you with the capacity to build and strengthen the above skills and competencies. Coupled with other out-of-classroom experiences such as home stays, travel, work, or internships, the entire experience offers you an unparalleled opportunity to create a “toolkit” of competencies that will impress an employer and help you stand apart from other job applicants.

“Looking at my past employers, the skills that eventually landed me the position were not necessarily the ones listed in the desired qualifications. Instead, unique features such as study abroad, writing skills and extracurricular activities have been real selling points for employers...”

—What's My Competitive Advantage?
Wall Street Journal, Feb. 24, 2011

“When talking about your study abroad experience, always focus on specific interactions, moments, people and events instead of talking generically about how valuable the overall experience was.”

—Help Employers See the Value of Your Study Abroad Experience,
Kelly Cuene,
www.studentbranding.com

Deciding to Study Abroad in a Purposeful Way

Your ability to interpret the value of an education abroad experience to an employer will be easier if your decision to go abroad is linked to your career goals. The challenge to both education abroad and career advisors is to proactively assist you to take full advantage of your time overseas. This requires the concerted collaboration of faculty and career and study abroad advisors *prior to the start of your overseas sojourn.*

“Balancing multiple demands [on campus] is tough, especially when stakeholder goals are in conflict. But adding one more goal—the goal of enhancing career advantage—may actually help. That’s because, according to the Boston education market research firm Eduventures, incoming freshmen perceive professional preparation as one of the leading drivers of a college’s educational value. Once students recognize that education abroad can provide multiple avenues to achieving professional development goals, they may be more likely to view their time away with a seriousness they may not currently have. And an engaged student abroad will likely be a better student in the classroom.”

—“The Career Value of Education Abroad”

Sheila Curran

NAFSA International Educator

Nov-Dec 2007

Take the initiative! Whether it takes place in one-on-one advising discussions or within a structured pre-departure seminar or course, you will benefit from the opportunity to reflect upon your general reasons for studying abroad; your decision to study in a particular country in English or in another language; and your interest in non-classroom experiences such as voluntary service, internships, and travel within or beyond the region of your study abroad program.

What else can you do to assess the “fit” of a program with your career or academic goals as you consider your options to study abroad?

- Ask the study abroad office for the names of students – or alumni – who recently participated in the program you’re considering. Write them to get a first-hand glimpse of a program and to review how, with hindsight, they might have been better prepared for the experience or taken greater advantage of the program in terms of their career aspirations.
- Prepare a list of important questions to review with both a study abroad advisor and a career counselor. Giving careful consideration to these questions before

you depart will focus your decision-making in-country and sharpen your thinking about how the program you're looking at best meets your needs.

These questions will get you started:

- How will the study abroad experience add valuable new skills to your presentation of interests and career goals on your resumé? Work on this document before you leave campus! It will be much easier to edit upon your return home.
- Is improving your language skills an important goal?
- Do you value as much immersion as possible in the local culture? Would living in a family home stay, instead of a residence hall, be important?
- Would you have an opportunity for a part-time internship (or full-time in the summer if you study abroad in Spring semester) or other means of experiential learning such as a volunteer or service-learning project?
- What opportunities are there for travel outside your home city? What are your options for either individual or group experiences on your own or as part of the program?
- Is it important to you that the program offer an opportunity for reflection to take stock of how you're achieving your personal, academic, and career goals? How and when does this take place?

If your campus provides a pre-departure workshop for students studying abroad, you will have the chance to consider these questions. If not, it will be useful for you to discuss them with an advisor. Write down your answers to these and other important questions and take them with you; this will allow you to review how well you're meeting your goals at different times throughout your time abroad.

Taking Advantage of Career Connections While Abroad

As we said earlier, it's important for you to keep in mind ways in which you can continue to build career connections throughout your time abroad. Why? It's a unique opportunity to practice and improve your communication skills; learn the value of professional networking; and gain a better understanding about the global job market by investigating conditions in the country, community, and region in which you're studying.

Here are a few tips on how you can brush up on your skills and gain valuable career insights:

Communications

- Use the list of alumni you obtained on your campus to set up appointments for “informational” interviews (best if you’ve discussed this with your career advisor before leaving!). Introduce yourself and request a brief meeting to review the career field they’re in, the current state of the job market in the field, how their work is or is not linked to their undergraduate or graduate studies, and what advantages they see in working abroad.
- Keep track of your contacts and the outcomes of all your planned and unplanned meetings with alumni, faculty, and other ex-patriate professionals. If you have an interest in pursuing work in their field, this contact list will be invaluable when you return home and want to follow up with individuals.
- If a homestay is part of your program, use this opportunity to learn about the culture, economics, and politics of your local community. Conducting these conversations will make you a better informed person when you’re meeting with other professionals.

Networking

This is the process of identifying contacts (including U.S. and international faculty, staff, and fellow students) who you believe can contribute to your knowledge and understanding of the local job market or sector you are interested in. Even if this is not yet clear to you, it’s important to learn and practice the art of discussing your career interests with others.

Conducting these discussions is what is referred to as an “informational interview.” This makes it sound a bit more formal than it is –you’re usually enjoying a casual, but focused, conversation with someone willing to share his or her knowledge and experience of an industry or career field with you.

Below is an example of the type of dialogue you can expect to have. Many successful professionals have changed their career focus, and you can gain valuable insights by asking someone:

- “Did you have a clear idea of your career goals in college?” or, “Did you think going abroad would help you find a job after graduation?”

You might be surprised at how this opens up a conversation. You can then follow up with:

- “Looking back, how did your study abroad experience impact your career direction?”

To gain insights into a specific field or sector, you might ask these questions:

- “Is the work you’re doing now what you expected to be doing with your degree and based on the experiences you had through college?”
- “Did you have a mentor or close colleague who helped you move forward early in your career?”
- “How have you used the skills and competencies you gained through studying abroad – or any other type of international experience – in your career?”
- “What have been the most important lessons you learned from your time abroad that have helped you in your professional life?”

You may already have started to build such a network in your home community and on campus. The point is to keep thinking about ways to gain new insights and advice while abroad. If you do have a clear career goal, try to arrange a visit to a local employer in your field in order to discuss their business and hiring practices and explore the differences in organizational life within the workplace.

Upon Return to Campus: How to Effectively Market Your Study Abroad Experience to Employers

The majority of students study abroad during their sophomore or junior years. This means that you will have at least one, and perhaps two, years to “unpack” your study abroad experience upon returning to campus. This is enough time to clarify how your international experience could influence your career goals and impact your job search strategy.

It is up to you to make the case and demonstrate the link between your study abroad experience and the specific skills valued by the company or organization you want to work for.

The following are suggested steps you can take upon return to campus:

- Visit a career services advisor to revise and edit your resumé to incorporate the new interpersonal skills and intercultural competencies that you strengthened while abroad.

- Discuss ways to strengthen your cover letter to articulate how your study abroad experience is an asset for an employer.
- Participate in campus or community programs that provide opportunities to practice articulating what you learned and the steps you took to gain or strengthen intercultural and professional skills.
- Discuss your international experience with international students from the country in which you studied to gain a fresh perspective on the culture and values of that society.

As you prepare to conduct your job search, re-write your resumé, develop a cover letter, and prepare for interviews, keep in mind the qualities and skills that employers expect of a candidate who had studied abroad. These would include:

- Strong problem solving skills and keen analytic ability
- Tolerance for ambiguity and ability to adapt in new environments
- Interpersonal communications skills
- Cross-cultural competencies (could include language skills and ability to work well in different cultural settings)
- Personal traits such as character, self-reliance, and dependability

Strengthening Your Career Toolkit: Articulating Newly Acquired Skills & Competencies

Crafting an Effective Resumé

What is a resumé?

- It's a marketing tool and often the first way that you "introduce" yourself to an employer or someone whom you're asking for an informational interview.
- It's an organic or dynamic document that will change and evolve over the course of your career. It's important to remember that it needs to change as you gain new skills and experience – or as you change the course of your career after graduation.

Before writing your resumé, you need to reflect upon the international skills and competencies you have gained from your study abroad experience. As we

suggested earlier, the time to consider how your experience “fits” into your resumé is before you leave campus. Whether or not you visit a career counselor before departure, you do want to make an appointment to see an advisor upon your return.

While there are generally accepted formats for a resumé, it’s best to discuss your document with a career services counselor or advisor who understands your specific academic program and career interests or preferences.

Audit your time abroad to highlight professional experiences and new intercultural competencies, and be prepared to describe them – using specific language – in your resume. You will need to develop a number of unique and individualized bullet points that show specific ways in which you gained skills and competencies during your study abroad experience.

An employer will not automatically “see” what may be very obvious to you about a skill or an experience you had while studying abroad!

It’s up to you to showcase and articulate the value of critical incidents, classroom work, community engagement, or international travel – and to be able to discuss why any or all of these activities make you a strong candidate for a particular job assignment in an organization or company.

Tips:

- Keep it simple.
- Make no mistakes in spelling or documentation of dates, places, or roles.
- Write specific as opposed to overly general bullet statements – no longer than two sentences as illustrated below.
- Make it no longer than one page in length at this stage of your life.
- Use this example for placing your study abroad program on your resumé:

Education

Quinnipiac University	Hamden, CT
B.A., Political Science	Expected May 2012
University of Botswana (AIFS Program)	Gaborone, Botswana
Coursework in African studies and economics	Sept–Dec 2011
If you wrote a research paper, cite the title here	

- Other types of headers that will showcase your overseas experience and related accomplishments on your home campus include, for example:
- Cross-Cultural Campus Involvement
- Foreign Languages
- Countries Visited
- Volunteer Service

Here are examples of the type of thought-provoking phrases you might use to craft bullet statements about different international experiences on your resumé:

Strengthened Cross-Cultural Skills:

- Adapted to cultural differences and customs through daily interaction with my host family over a period of 4 months
- Overcame societal differences and fostered cultural understanding through a short-term work experience at a local business
- Gained a greater appreciation for diversity and cultural differences through voluntary service experience at a local school

Developed Language Competency/Communication Skills

- Passed proficiency examination in [name of language] or obtained certificate for intensive language study at [name of college or institute]
- Cultivated language and communication skills through sustained dialogue with my host family and others whom I met in my host community
- Learned to use nonverbal and verbal communication to overcome language barriers

Flexibility/Risk-Taking

- Learned how to adapt to unanticipated situations and improvise new plans due to periodic travel mishaps and unexpected events
- Modified my way of life to maximize exposure and opportunities for learning in my local community

*Adapted from the Career Development Center, SUNY-Binghamton

Presenting Skills & Competencies in a Cover Letter

A cover letter complements the experiences outlined on your resume. It should not replicate the same information in a prose style format. It should highlight the attributes that set you apart from other candidates! One such attribute is your international experience while you studied abroad.

The cover letter should demonstrate to an employer – in as explicit language as possible – why you possess the skills and experiences that are a match for the requirements of the job.

Tips:

- Keep it to one page
- Write it in a formal business style
- Even if it's not evident that the job requires international experience, you can highlight appropriate transferable skills gained through your time abroad (*e.g., independence, tolerance, self-confidence, problem-solving skills, ability to adapt in different environments and to work in harmony with people of differing values and backgrounds*)
- If the job is with an international NGO or a multinational company doing business in the part of the world where you studied, then the direct value of all your international and intercultural skills is more obvious – but you still need to be specific in describing how your studies, skills, and competencies will be of value in your performance on the job

Articulating Skills & Competencies in an Interview

A good interview is about telling a good story. It's about weaving a narrative in response to questions about your ability to do a job, carry out your duties, and adapt to the organization and its expectations of staff.

When speaking to employers, address the value of both the general and the specific skills you developed while studying abroad. *It's important not to assume that the interviewer will realize how your international experience is relevant to your candidacy.*

Examples might include: You are adept at managing change; you are independent and have self-discipline while being sensitive to the needs of others. Dozens of work-related characteristics are developed abroad, which you can discuss in your interview: resourcefulness, versatility, persistence, an observant and calm demeanor, diligence, multifaceted skills in communications, broad and

strategic thinking, an ability to deal with ambiguities, courage, an ability to take on challenging work, open-mindedness, flexibility, resourcefulness, tact, listening and observing skills, an ability to deal with stress, sense of humor, awareness of interpersonal politics, respect for protocol and hierarchy, loyalty, and tenacity.

An interviewer may provide you with an opportunity to tell a story based upon your international experience and your answers to any question should not be too lengthy. Questions may be posed like these:

- What did you learn about yourself as a result of your study abroad experience?
- Why did you choose to study in [name of country]? Why was it important to you?
- How did you get engaged in the local culture outside the classroom?
- Can you describe a time when you had to change your behavior to accommodate or adjust to different local conditions?

Tips:

- Practice – practice – practice
- Work with your career services office to arrange a mock interview with an alumnus ideally someone who studied abroad!
- Craft examples to share in the interview that illustrate how you gained a specific interpersonal or intercultural skill during your study abroad experience

Resources

“Building Connections: Your Study Abroad Experience & Your Career.” *SUNY-Binghamton*.

www2.binghamton.edu/career-development-center/students/undergraduate/international-opportunities/pdf/Building%20Connections_Study%20Abroad%20and%20Your%20Career.pdf

“International Opportunities, Industry-Specific Information.” *Duke University Career Center*. Excellent reference tool showing how to interpret skills and competencies in relation to the needs of employers in different fields. Terrific links to organizations.

www.studentaffairs.duke.edu/career/resources/international-ops

“Resume Tips for Your International Experience.” *University of Minnesota Learning Abroad Center*.

www.umabroad.umn.edu/assets/files/PDFs/students/returnedStudents/resumeTips.pdf

Citron, James L., and Vija G. Mendelson. "Coming Home: Relationships, Roots and Unpacking." *Abroad View*. Essay on the challenges and opportunities of re-adjusting upon returning to campus.

www.abroadview.org/return/citron_mendelson.htm

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Curran, Sheila. "The Other Side of Education Abroad: Same City, Different Results." *International Educator* 16.6 (2007). NAFSA: Association of International Educators. An essay depicting different outcomes in a job interview that were a result of two different approaches to the same study abroad experience.

www.nafsa.org/publication.sec/periodicals/international_educator_1/ie_nov_dec_2007/web_extra_other_side/

Gardner, Phil, Linda Gross, and Inge Steglitz. "Unpacking Your Study Abroad Experience: Critical Reflection for Workplace Competencies." *Collegiate Employment Research Institute, Michigan State University, CERI Research Brief 1-2008*. Excellent model of a seminar for returning students to assist them to make sense of their experience abroad, and to understand how to articulate skills learned.

www.studyabroad.isp.msu.edu/people/unpacking_brief.pdf

Matherly, Cheryl, and William Nolting. "Career Benefits: Understanding & Articulating the Skills you Gained Abroad." *Abroad View* 10:1 (2007).

Mueller, Sherry, and Mark Overmann. *Working World: Careers in International Education, Exchange and Development*. Georgetown University Press, 2008. The best volume outlining development of career pathways in these fields. Excellent advice and terrific professional profiles of leaders in each field who respond candidly to questions about their success and the influences in their lives.

Paul, Nancy. "Global Competency Quick Reference Guide." *Career Development Center at Binghamton University, State University of New York*. Excellent reference tool to assist students to understand the meaning of "global competency" and how their experience abroad translates on a resumé, in a cover letter, and during a job interview.

www2.binghamton.edu/career-development-center/quick-reference-guides/global%20competency.pdf

Tillman, Martin, Ed. "Impact of Education Abroad on Career Development: Volume 1." *American Institute For Foreign Study*.

www.aifsabroad.com/advisors/pdf/Impact_of_Education_AbroadI.pdf

Tillman, Martin. "The Right Tool for the Job." *International Educator* 14.4 (2005). NAFSA: Association of International Educators. An essay discussing the importance of focusing on the development of a career portfolio as an undergraduate; from the perspective of a career advisor preparing graduate students to enter the workplace.

www.nafsa.org/_/File/_/InternationalEducator/FrontLinesJulAug05.pdf

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Martin Tillman is currently President of Global Career Compass, an international consultancy serving both students and international educators seeking to articulate the intercultural competencies gained through education abroad experiences.

For eleven years, served as Associate Director of Career Services, providing career coaching and professional development support to graduate students and alumni throughout the world at The Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in Washington, D.C.

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He holds a B.A. degree from the State University of New York at Stony Brook and M.A. degrees from Colgate University and World Learning's School for International Training.

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In affiliation with 23 universities in 19 countries, AIFS organizes study abroad programs annually for more than 5,000 American students during the semester, academic year, and summer. Courses are for academic credit. AIFS works closely with over 500 American colleges and universities, providing students and faculty with high quality educational experiences abroad.

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