

Go Abroad! (but do it well)

By Ricardo Galliano Court

Why should you study abroad? Well, few American students do. Fewer than 1% of college students study abroad. Study abroad is an upper-middle class rite of passage more than any other activity in college life. Study abroad is a merit badge, and judging from the stories, it can be a drunken blur. Some programs are little more than academic tourism with easy classes taught in English and cultural tours heavy on the food and wine, light on the academic rigor. Students are routinely shuttled around in groups and take their classes with other Americans in 'study centers'. (When you are at your Study Abroad Fair or look at the website of the most popular programs, notice that there are few if any pictures of students in classrooms, libraries, or archives among those of undergrads on mountaintops, in cafés, or in front of monuments.) When polled after their experience abroad, many students express disappointment that they did not have the 'immersion' experience that they were expecting. Study abroad can be fun, it can include tourism, *and* be a valuable addition to your academic program. There is, however, an entire industry that is dedicated to preventing you from achieving your academic goals, and making a huge amount of money off of you by getting in your way. These service providers claim that study abroad will make you into a 'global citizen' and make you at home in the world. Fewer than 10% of students study for a full academic year, and better than 90% study abroad for a semester or less—how such a short experience creates that 'globalizing effect' is anyone's guess. There is very little evidence that students improve on their basic knowledge of world history or geography. An otherwise positive study showed *reduced* knowledge after an abroad experience. Have I gotten your attention? Good.

Done well, study abroad will enable see other perspectives in international affairs, to develop leadership skills, to improve your language proficiency, provide you with an opportunity to immerse yourself in another culture (resulting in a greater ability to deal with cultural differences at home), to heighten your critical thinking skills, to develop your international professional network for future work and research abroad. Ask yourself: is this the only time I hope to go abroad? Do I hope that my future career has some international elements to it? If so, before you even depart on your study abroad experience, you should be contemplating career development activities you are going to develop when you return. Would you like to conduct research abroad? If so, you need to build a network of contacts who will be able to formally invite you to come and study (a requirement of many fellowship programs). Would you like to work abroad? If so, ask yourself what kinds of experiences abroad would appeal to an employer; how about professional office experience, volunteer experience, or independent research? Some employers are specifically looking for applicants who have international experience and they report that students with study abroad experience tend to make the first cut in a job search. Why? Among a wide range of answers we consistently find that employers value people who have had to contend with being the 'other' abroad because they tend to be personally and professionally less rigid and tend to interact well with people from a wide variety of backgrounds. What will your study abroad experience say about you?

Study abroad is expensive; how are you going to pay for it? There are many scholarships, grants, and loans out there that are both need-based as well as merit-based. A quick search will turn up dozens of pots of money from which you might dip. Many seek to support students of a particular gender, race or religion. Some concentrate on specific

languages, or particular academic disciplines and professional development. Many ask you to take certain kinds of courses or to do fieldwork or intern in a particular area. Some are competitive in terms of academic, artistic, or athletic talent. Virtually every college has institutionally based scholarships financed by study abroad fees assessed to other students. Governments, including our own also finance study abroad to certain countries. Charities, churches, and civic organizations like Rotary offer scholarships based on community service. For many decades, research fellowships have been providing 'seed money' for promising research projects that could be the basis for careers over the long term. The best way to approach these programs and to eventually win funding is to articulate why you are going abroad, and what you want to do when you get there, *in concrete terms*. The best way *not* to get funding is to be vague, or to stress that you 'love to travel'. Of course you love to travel; who doesn't?

Before you choose a program or even a country you should begin by setting some foundational goals. Though we call it *study* abroad, few students think about making an academic plan *before* finalizing their decisions on where to go. And when faced with limited choices, students tend toward the managerial and away from the entrepreneurial, that is, toward making do rather than seeking the experience that most closely approaches their personal ideal. Ask yourself some basic questions: what kinds of classes do you hope to take abroad? In what kind of environment? At a foreign university, in a foreign language, and in a classroom filled with students from that place? Do you hope to conduct field work? Would you like to work with a professor conducting research? What kinds of disciplines do you want to explore? Art history? Politics? Development and poverty? International trade or law?

Environmental conservation? What are your personal, academic, and professional ambitions, and how can you begin to see study abroad fitting into your career path?

Goals need to be ambitious, but also doable. Goals that are too lofty may make it difficult for you to identify appropriate opportunities, but non-specific goals may make for an overwhelming search that will inevitably stall. To begin, it is helpful to work through some framing questions and set realistic expectations for yourself:

Why do I want to study abroad?

What do I hope to accomplish abroad?

Why is this experience important to me?

What opportunities do I think will be available to me?

Will I be able to volunteer, work, or intern while abroad?

These questions will help you to establish important parameters for your search. Ultimately, you will need to give an answer to the question of how the opportunities you find will contribute to your long term personal, academic, and professional goals.

Now that you have set some foundational goals, you have to get specific; you need to get real. Answering the basic questions is just a start. Refining your goals will make allow you to judge programs on their merits. Without refining your goals you will not be able to find a program that is a good fit for you. Don't leave your choice to chance or to first impressions.

Now you need to hone your questions:

What aspects of study abroad are important to me and why?

Which environments would foster language immersion and fluency? Which might not?

Do you want to live with local students? In your own apartment? With a family?

What type of program suits your needs? Academic vs. service learning vs. internship program?

What difference will location make? The country or region? Urban or rural environment?

Do you want to experience an up and coming country? A developing country? Western?

Will you have the ability to meet and network local professors or professionals?

*Do you want to work with NGOs? International organizations? Governments?
Businesses?*

After you have gotten more specific, you need to be realistic. Ask yourself, how long you need to accomplish these goals. If fluency is very important to you, for example, you will need to stay for an academic or calendar year. One semester *will not get you there*. Period.

(Remember back to your first year in college, did you have it all figured out by the last week of classes? *Of course not*. That is how it will feel abroad. Just when you start to get the hang of things, you will be packing up to come home.) There are practical considerations you have to make too. Can you list the courses that you can take abroad? Does your major restrict the number or type of courses they will accept from abroad? Does your major require that you take specific courses abroad? Ask yourself when it makes the most sense for you to go abroad? Did you know, with a little preparation, you can even graduate abroad? Did you consider looking for an internship so that you can extend your stay, and therefore, increase your cultural and linguistic exposure?

At a certain point you will find yourself struggling to answer these questions. You will need to talk with an adviser. What kind of adviser should you seek out? What kind of advice will the adviser in your major give you? What will your professors tell you? How does that fit with the information you are getting from the Study Abroad Office? Did you consider making an appointment with a career adviser? Take notes and compare them. Share your notes with each adviser. Know that at times advisers are resistant to talking to you about things outside of their specific domain (academic advisers may not want to talk about study abroad, study abroad advisers may not want to talk about academic goals, professors may be reticent to talk about

your personal goals). Press them. Insist. You are going to create an integrated program. You will need integrated advice. Each of these advisers will have interesting perspectives on study abroad; expect some of them to conflict. The program you ultimately build may be very different from the one you initially envisioned.

In order to choose the right program for you, you will need to review and revise your needs several times. Take some time to review your answers to all of the questions above each and every time you receive significant new information. Prioritize your goals. You may have to choose between one program that offers most of the things you need and another that offers one particular element that is important to you, but not others. Pay particular attention to which of your study abroad requirements are most important to you and identify those that you would be willing to sacrifice. This list will no doubt change as you do more thinking. Your priorities may flip entirely. Remember, you will have important experiences abroad that you did not plan for. Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Don't create a vision that will crowd out happenstance! Put yourself in a place where random, wonderful things can happen to you!

Start with a broad list of possibilities, narrowing the list with your shifts in priorities. You may need two completely different lists if you have competing visions. Visit your Study Abroad Office both in person and online. Use your critical thinking skills for uncorroborated information abroad. Narrow programs according to your criteria. Seek out other students who have been on the same programs. Many study abroad offices have peer advisers who have been on those programs; Academic departments may have a long history sending students to particular places. Will the program that you are considering live up to the glossy impression served up by

its marketing materials? Make sure that you will have completed the prerequisites for each program that interests you by your scheduled departure. It would be a shame to find the ideal program only to be turned down! Eventually, you should be able to whittle down your broad list to three to five serious contenders. If you can only find one or two, you may be missing out on genuine opportunities. Seek out help.

Get critical. Bring this list of programs to your various advisers. Can you articulate some of the pros and cons of each program you are considering? Go to the Study Abroad Fair, generally held early in the fall semester. Bring a list of questions to the table for each program. Often, the tables represented by each program will be staffed by students who have just returned from that program. Is there a professional study abroad adviser assigned a liaison to that program? Don't let the adviser limit the discussion to the merits of the program. What are the downsides? Be demanding. Have a critical eye.

Once you have chosen a program and been accepted, there are things that you can do to prepare to go. Are there alumni from your college where you are going? An online search will probably turn up a fair number. Connect up with them. Most alums abroad are thrilled to hear from current students of their *alma mater*! An email of couple of paragraphs of a couple of lines each is best: Who you are, what you are studying, what career path you are on, when you will be in country, and an invitation to coffee or lunch soon after you arrive. *Do not ask for a job or an internship.* Ask for a conversation and leads on people who are interested in the activities you would like to pursue abroad. A couple of well thought out emails could open up a local world of unforeseen richness and untold opportunities. Start reading a local newspaper as soon as you have chosen a program; there are hundreds online, dozens for every country. There is

almost certainly a paper online for your exact location. By spending an hour or so each day reading local features and national news, you will be up to speed with all of the latest events (and even the scandals that everyone is buzzing about!); you will be ready to enter into intelligent conversations right away. Are there exchange students on campus from the country where you are going? From the very city or region of your chosen program? Connect up with them! Networks and housing arrangements can be begun even before you departed.

Remember that majority of student who were disappointed that they did not have the immersion experience they expected? It will not happen *to you*. It will only happen *because of you!* *Let that 'immersion' experience begin even before you have departed!*

