

Brenda S. Robinson

*The need for multicultural understanding and second-language fluency is a priority within higher education as a means to re-establish America's role as a world leader in education. Yet the barriers to study abroad and second-language learning are vast and have their basis in U.S. values and attitudes toward multicultural knowledge. This article discusses the basic issues affecting study abroad enrollment and suggests ideas to promote the internationalization of the educational experience.*

# Overcoming Deterrents to Study Abroad

## A Contextual Perspective

What purpose does study abroad have in higher education, and how does study abroad 'fit' into the programs or services available at U.S. colleges and universities—especially metropolitan universities? The two questions are closely related. Let us examine the broader question first.

If the purpose of higher education is merely to enable students to accumulate courses that qualify them for employment upon graduation, study abroad is unimportant except perhaps as enrichment for students who have both the interest and resources to pursue it. But if the purpose of higher education is to provide leaders for the future, critical thinkers, problem solvers, scientists, health professionals, financiers, environmental programmers, mathematicians, artists, musicians, writers, transnational mediators—all of whom function today in a global arena—then we must encourage students to go abroad as a way of gaining a sense of history and an understanding of shared world responsibility. Living in another nation, studying in another university, speaking another language, and going about the routine of daily life in a foreign context, all provide the base for genuine transcultural understanding. These activities provide self-confidence and leadership qualities that are critical in today's interdependent world.

In this context, there is a vital role for study abroad. Why then do so few United States' students seek opportunities to study abroad? Today, hundreds of study abroad programs exist at U.S. institutions of higher education. But, despite a proliferation of bilateral agreements between U.S. and foreign universities, less than 0.5 percent of U.S. students

take advantage of these opportunities. According to statistics compiled by the Institute of International Education, in 1990 approximately 70,000 U.S. students in U.S. colleges and universities received academic credit for study overseas. Carlson et. al. have found that 23 percent of college students whom they surveyed had no interest in study abroad. Additionally, 50 percent of the students indicated that study abroad was unnecessary for their studies; 40 percent indicated that study abroad was inappropriate for their academic major, and 46 percent considered study abroad as a deterrent to graduation. These views and statistics reflect an underlying value structure in the United States that does not recognize the importance of an overseas experience.

### **Attitudinal Barriers**

Perhaps this phenomenon reflects the historic tendency of the United States toward isolationism from the rest of the world; perhaps it also has roots in the United States' sense of self-sufficiency and world leadership after World War II.

Beginning in the late 1940s and extending through the 1950s and 1960s, the United States attached little importance to learning about other countries or speaking foreign languages. Many other nations learned the English of the United States and sought to emulate U.S. strategies for economic development. The United States perceived itself and was perceived by other nations as the economic leader of the world, with little need to learn about the ways of other countries. Foreign language instruction in the United States declined and geography disappeared from the high school curriculum. Our comfortable insularity protected us against the prospect that the world might change or that our position of international leadership might be challenged.

Higher education continues to reflect that sense of distance from international problems. It rarely assigns value or status to study abroad. Few colleges and universities dedicate staff to administer study abroad programs, instead adding the task to the responsibilities of already overburdened individuals, despite the fact that management of a quality study abroad program is highly labor intensive. We rarely integrate study abroad into the curriculum, and we do not promote it in initial recruitment brochures, in orientation, in catalogue descriptions, or in advising sessions. Study abroad at times encounters strong opposition from financial aid personnel, registrars, and administrative staff who resist the administrative complexity of overseas programs. Neither is study abroad a part of the conventional faculty perception of education or responsibility. Many faculty tend not to value such international experience—for themselves or for their students.

Many parents, students, spouses, and faculty also question the quality of education in foreign countries. This seems especially true in public universities, which tend to be affected more directly by the vagaries of public opinion. A common question, for example, revolves around the international student population in U.S. institutions. If education was so wonderful 'over there,' why do 'they' come here for higher education?

How could 'their instruction' be as good as 'ours'? How can we give credit for education overseas if we don't know what 'they' are doing, if the syllabus is different?

These attitudinal barriers to study abroad are even higher in many metropolitan universities. One reason is that U.S. urban environments are multicultural communities. In Los Angeles public schools, for example, more than 120 languages are spoken by the student enrollment. The City of Long Beach has the highest concentration of southeast Asians in the United States. Instruction in many of Miami's schools is in Spanish because students do not have English fluency. Many university students—and their parents—consider this exposure to other cultures sufficient to understand the world. Why spend the money to travel when students can get an international experience in their own backyard?

Clearly, metropolitan universities would do well to derive all possible benefits from the cultural richness of their student bodies and their environment. In metropolitan universities, much more could be accomplished by using the kaleidoscopic mosaic of the local scene in order to give their students a broader perspective on the world in which they live. Indeed, one of the examples of affordable 'international programs' listed later in this article describes a program that does just that. Yet no local experience can have the full impact of study abroad. Local ethnic communities, while often retaining their basic cultural values, do modify their life-styles. They adopt and adapt, combining their original traditions with those of their new environment.

Nevertheless, a strong ethnic community can be of extraordinary value to metropolitan universities as they strive to promote and support study abroad. Representatives of an Italian-American community can provide useful insights on language and culture of the 'old country' for university classrooms. A Polish-American organization can provide scholarships for travel or funds for library materials. A German-American group might open up opportunities for home stays in Germany to reduce students' cost of travel. A Chinese-American community might arrange for introductions for students and faculty to business or government in Hong Kong, China, or Taiwan. Sister-city relationships, often stimulated by local ethnic groups, can provide an effective structure for a variety of affordable educational experiences abroad for financially hard-pressed students. Metropolitan universities would be wise to build those bridges to ethnic American populations in their communities.

Many observers also place some blame on the media who focus on conflict and crisis overseas. From the threat of terrorism or airplane hijacking come legitimate fears of traveling, even to relatively tranquil parts of the world. The media's role in encouraging xenophobic hysteria only serves to increase the fears of students or their families who are already nervous or uncertain about the value of study abroad for any period of time.

### **The Barriers of Timing and Cost**

In addition to this variety of attitudinal obstacles to study abroad programs, there exist as well serious barriers of timing and of cost.

In the absence of a clear linkage between study abroad and the degree program, a year or even a semester abroad may place a student out of sequence with offered courses on the home campus—a major consideration in this time of financial cutbacks and course cancellations. Furthermore, many study abroad programs are limited to upper division students, whose overriding interest is to schedule courses in the academic major. Yet most overseas programs are limited to courses in the liberal arts and not in other professional or preprofessional subjects. This discourages or prevents many students from considering study abroad. How does an upper division biology major study overseas when the only courses offered are social science and language? These barriers are unnecessary. Many good programs exist that provide practical and affordable ways to integrate study abroad into all curricula. Some of these will be described below.

The cost of studying abroad is certainly a major barrier. For many students, especially in metropolitan universities, the cost of a year or even a semester in another country is prohibitive. In order to go abroad for any length of time, many place-bound students (those with families and those who work full time) would be compelled to give up salary and benefits. Students whose family income is low cannot afford the traditional 'year abroad' programs.

In addition, students, spouses, and their families want to know what the study abroad experience will do to enhance future life-style choices and employment. What really is the value of this experience? What will the expenditure of this money gain? Will business and industry recognize the value of language fluency and experiencing foreign culture? Will these skills help get a job? Why should a student or family spend \$10,000 for a year abroad or \$2,000 for a summer course in a foreign country?

### **Overcoming the Barriers**

It is unrealistic to think that the values and attitudes of the U.S. population will change quickly, or that the programmatic and financial barriers to traditional study abroad programs will disappear. Yet, if higher education is to prepare national and international leaders, universities must value the study abroad experience and take decisive steps to remove the real or imagined barriers that discourage students from participation.

Metropolitan universities have a special responsibility in this regard. Many of their students face problems in meeting the costs of higher education, and they often come from family or social backgrounds that do not understand, accept, or encourage study abroad. Colleges and universities can play a major role in shaping values of the society, both present and future. Metropolitan universities—indeed, all universities—must make it attractive and possible for students to engage the world. It is not sufficient to make programs available and wait for students to express interest; we must exhort our students to look beyond the borders of the United States, entice them to go abroad, and make it easy for them to take that crucial first step in the proverbial "journey of one thousand miles."

There are specific ways that a university can help students take advantage of opportunities to spend time abroad as part of their education. Three strike me as especially important. First, it is essential that the president serve as a strong advocate for the international dimension of the campus mission. There is no substitute for a strong and visionary presidential leadership in the creation and development of an institutional ethos that supports investment in international projects and study abroad. It is the president who can help shape a mission statement, a strategic plan, administrative policies and systems, faculty recruitment and development programs, curriculum, fund-raising efforts, and community relations that emphasize the importance of study abroad to the academic life of a campus. Many of these items are generic, policy oriented, and perhaps self-evident. However, if neither the president nor the executive leadership reflect a concern for international education in general and study abroad in particular, these programs will always be perceived as having only marginal importance to students and faculty. In the absence of a clear institutional commitment to supporting students who want to—or should—go abroad, it is not surprising that few students take advantage of the opportunities that exist on most campuses.

Second, campuses must become flexible and creative in the design of study abroad opportunities. A good program, for example, need not focus on a semester or full year of study at a prestigious foreign university, as useful as that may be for some students. Neither must a program offer academic credit to be effective in opening students' eyes to the world. Often students need to be given a brief exposure of two to three weeks of structured and supervised travel abroad in order to gain the perspective and confidence to embark upon a more ambitious program later in their academic career. Study tours arranged and supervised by faculty members from liberal arts and professional programs—with opportunities for students to experience first hand the global aspects of any field or profession—can be especially effective ways to expose students to the world. Faculty members can be quite creative in developing such programs, if given proper administrative encouragement and support.

One caveat: Travel abroad, while certainly interesting and valuable, does not in itself guarantee that students will gain the kind of global perspective and understanding that a college or university intends. Surely just the experience of visiting a foreign country has an impact on even the least prepared or sophisticated student. However, a university must seek to provide not just exposure to a foreign country or culture but also provide some way to interpret the experience, integrate it into a student's educational experience, and provide a stimulus for further travel, study, and work after the university experience. It is crucial, therefore, that all study abroad programs and activities be carefully planned, well conceived and supervised by faculty or staff, linked to a student's educational program, and—if feasible—designed in collaboration with a foreign partner (a university, business, or government entity; sister-city; or other appropriate organizations) that will add depth and meaning to the experience for a student.

Finally, perhaps the most useful and time-saving step any metropolitan university could take is to discover, modify, or adopt

existing models for study abroad that are inexpensive, relevant to a varied curriculum, integrated into a foreign culture, and responsive to the special needs of a student body that is increasingly nontraditional. There is no need to reinvent the wheel or to develop programs *de novo*. There are many models of creative, innovative programs.

### Innovative Examples

- A landscape architecture program developed a core curriculum that parallels the on-campus curriculum and utilizes overseas locations to 'internationalize' the applied curriculum. A faculty member accompanies the group of approximately twenty students. The program is open to upper-division students and competition for acceptance is keen. A different set of countries is selected each year. The duration of the annual program is twelve weeks. Contact: Professor Ronald Batterson, School of Architecture and Environmental Design, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA 93407, 805/756-1316.
- An on-campus graduate international marketing course conducts marketing surveys and develops marketing plans for two firms each year, one in China and one in India. Participating firms are chosen by campus faculty who have contacts in the respective nations. During the three-week winter intersession, the students travel to these countries, presenting their proposals to the firms that 'contracted' with them. To date, every participating firm has employed the marketing plan developed by the students. Student cost is underwritten by the firms in each nation and airfare is bid out to reduce costs. Contact: Dr. Bruce McNab, Director, Institute of Research and Business Development and Dr. Shyam Kamath, School of Business and Economics, California State University-Hayward, Hayward, CA 94542, 510/881-3291.
- A nursing program offers a three-credit course in multicultural nursing concepts. The course meets twice a week for the duration of the semester. At the end of the semester, the faculty member accompanies the class to Mexico for four weeks, where they live in a monastery for \$2/day. During the day, students attend culture orientation classes in the mornings and provide primary nursing care in the villages during the afternoons. Cost is less than \$600 per student, with half the cost underwritten through community projects conducted by the students. Contact: Dr. Mary Ann Levine, Department of Nursing, Humboldt State University, Arcata, CA 95521, 707/826-5137.
- A university sponsors students on volunteer projects overseas. Projects last from one week to one month, and students can earn credit, provided the home university documents prior approval. Projects can be completed during intersession, summer holidays, or any other time that a student has time off. Students work with volunteers from other nations and along side local residents. Cost is exceptionally low and experience is intensive. Contact: Council

on International Educational Exchange, Volunteer Service/Workcamps, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, NY 10017, 212/661-1414, ext. 1139; or Volunteers for Peace, 43 Tiffany Road, Belmont, VT 05730.

- A college promotes overseas work experience for its students through a reputable study-abroad membership organization. Students may work in the area of their studies if appropriate employment is available in the target nation, or they may work in one of a variety of employment opportunities approved by the overseas government. Work permission and visas are arranged by the U.S. organization. Students are encouraged to avail themselves of the opportunity to work overseas for short periods of time in order to integrate themselves into the culture. This opportunity enables students with limited fiscal resources to live overseas for a predetermined period of time. Contact: Council on International Educational Exchange, Work Exchanges, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, NY 10017, 212/661-1414, ext. 1130.
- An institution provides a binational business degree program between the home campus and a university in Moscow. Instruction is provided through lectures at each site and, on a predetermined schedule, simultaneously by satellite. The duration of this program segment is one semester. U.S. students are offered the opportunity to reside in Moscow and attend classes. Students in Moscow come to the U.S. campus for one semester of study to complete the residency requirement and degree. All courses are taught in English. Contact: Dr. Jay Tontz, Dean, School of Business and Economics, California State University Hayward, Hayward, CA 94542, 510/881-3291.
- A program in Ecuador teaches culture and language for part of the day and places students in credit-bearing internships related to their major area of study for the remainder of the day. The program is offered on a semester and academic year basis. Course offerings are general in nature so that home-campus credit will be granted by all colleges in the 60-plus member consortium that sponsors this program. Contact: Elaine Baron, Program Coordinator, Brookdale Community College, Lincroft, NJ 07738, 908/224-2774.
- A college, located in a low-income neighborhood with student enrollment primarily from low-income families, and has designed an intensive ten-day program in an ethnic neighborhood nearby. Students live and eat with families, accompany family members on their daily activities, attend religious services with the families, and partake in shopping and cooking, holiday rituals, and family celebrations. 'Internationalization' is assimilated through involvement with the local community, thereby placing the experience in a multicultural and relevant context. Cost is minimal and experience is immensely rewarding. Contact: Dr. Brenda Robinson, State University Dean, International Education, California State University, Chancellor's Office, 400 Golden Shore, Long Beach, CA 90802, 310/985-2859.

- A college adapted its anthropology class to create a global village on campus. Students researched housing and materials used of several different cultures and built housing that replicated those of the selected cultures. Furnishings were also culture appropriate. Daily living aspects, such as clothing, types and preparation of food, work activities, and recreation of the respective cultures were researched and included in the village experience. Faculty located area residents who were from the selected cultures and included them as resource individuals. Students spent a weekend in their 'houses' with the 'resident experts,' engaging in the culture's weekend activities. Contact: Dr. Charles Teel, Program Director, Sierra University, Costa Mesa, CA 92626, 909/785-2041, 785-2999, 785-2080.
- A university, which has campuses on three continents, requires all students to spend one semester at another campus before graduating. Students must have functional second-language ability. The curriculum on each campus is identical, ensuring that courses meet degree requirements. Because the curriculum is universal, credit transfer is not an issue. The academic cost for overseas study is identical to the home campus. The only additional cost is for airfare, which the college has secured at less than advertised market prices. Contact: Ron Koehn, Executive Assistant to the President, Teikyo International University, Le Mars, IA 51031, 712/546-2087.
- An upper-division international studies and language program offers several unique components: (1) A preparatory semester course in how to learn a second language and learning strategies—a 'more gain with less pain' approach; (2) Requirement of one-half the semester course enrollment in Japanese language (double the 'normal' language course enrollment), for two consecutive semesters, with the one-month January intersession providing additional intensive language instruction; (3) A fall semester of study in Sendai, Japan, which includes an integrated, self-managed language learning program; (4) A spring semester on-campus that continues the conversation/situation-based language instruction; and (5) A summer self-study support program in maintaining language functioning. The entire program is based on applied linguistic theory and integrates Japanese culture, etiquette, protocol, and daily living skills into the entire program. Contact: Dr. John Knapp, Director, International Center, 612/696-6310, or Dr. Phyllis Larson, Program Director and Coordinator of Japanese Language, 612/696-6723, Macalester College, St. Paul, MN 55105.
- A program takes graduate business students to Japan on a ten-day program that focuses on cross-cultural business practices, etiquette, and protocol. Students are prepared for the program through a series of seminars and readings. On-site, students visit business, industry, and financial institutions, integrating their knowledge of management and cross-cultural marketing theory, situational applications, and understanding Japanese business from the Japanese perspective. Credit may be arranged in advance and is granted upon completion of a project or paper. Contact: Dr. Irene

Lange, School of Business and Economics, California State University-Fullerton, Fullerton, CA 92634, 714/773-2592.

- An architecture department provides a one-month program in Czechoslovakia, combining art and architecture instruction with site visits throughout the area. On-campus courses are broadened to integrate theoretical architectural concepts into an international setting. Students have the opportunity to view architectural designs that are unavailable in the home state and apply these designs in their class projects. Contact: Professor Laura Joines, School of Architecture and Environmental Design, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA 93407, 805/756-1316.

## Conclusion

Major deterrents to study abroad are pervasive in metropolitan universities. Yet issues of curriculum, length of time, cost, student commitments to family and employment, prejudice, and fear can all be handled with creativity, if the institution itself values the experience and conveys that value to its faculty and students. We must rethink our values, restructure our expectations and our curriculum, challenge our faculty, and offer our students the one activity that can change their world—and ours. Metropolitan universities, as they define their mission and shape their priorities, surely face special problems as they search for new ways to prepare graduates for work and citizenship in a global environment. They should seize the opportunities to be energetic, creative, and even adventurous in finding ways to serve as an international resource to their students, faculty, and community.

### *Suggested Readings*

- Backman, Earl L. *Approaches to International Education*. New York: American Council on Education/Macmillan Publishing Company, 1984.
- Bowman, John E. *Educating American Undergraduates Abroad: The Development of Study Abroad Programs by American Colleges and Universities*. New York: Council on International Educational Exchange, 1987.
- Carlson, Jerry S., Barbara Burn, John Useem, and David Yachimowicz. *Study Abroad: The Experience of American Undergraduates in Western Europe and the United States*. New York: Council on International Educational Exchange, 1991.
- Cole, Johnnetta B. "International Education: Broadening the Base of Participation." Presentation at the 43rd International Conference on Educational Exchange, Charleston, South Carolina, November 1990.
- Kauffman, Norman L., Judith N. Martin, Henry D. Weaver, and Judy Weaver. *Students Abroad: Strangers at Home: Education for a Global Society*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, Inc., 1992.
- Zikopoulos, Marianthi, ed. *Open Doors: 1990-1991*. New York: Institute of International Education, 1991, p. 13.