

Study Abroad for an International Career

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Studying abroad is a popular way for students to live in another culture and prepare to enter an increasingly international job market. But the program you choose can be much less important for your career than what you make of it. "There's no one program that stands out," says Jordan Pollack, assistant director of the Office of International Programs at the University of Michigan. "Most programs, if they're academically worthwhile, will expose students to a wide range of cross cultural issues. The student not only learns the language, but explores alternative ways to address life problems." As you research programs and prepare to study abroad, assess your goals for the program and your career. Whether it's a rigorous academic opportunity unavailable at your home institution, immersion in another culture or foreign language proficiency, be clear on what you want.

Language Classes or Classes in the Language?

One of the most important decisions related to an international program is whether to take classes in another language, which will propel you towards fluency but might make you feel utterly lost, change your academic focus or sacrifice your grades.

"All my classes certainly had topics, but ostensibly, they were about learning the language," explains Susanna Goldfinger, 22, an English major at the University of Pennsylvania who took courses in French at the American University Center in Provence. For her, the shift away from course content was advantageous. "In terms of academics, learning a new language is as good as it gets."

Philip Gilman, 20, a student at the University of Wisconsin Madison Business School who is studying in Paris with his school's French Program, also chose to take his courses in French. "I can take business classes in English back home," he says. "I might as well take them in French here."

Whether you take your courses in another language or study another language, developing language skills can be infinitely rewarding.

"Genuine language proficiency opens many doors," says Pollack. Most international employers recognize the value of bilingual and polyglot employees. "Someone with real competency in another language will be able to represent a company's interest more effectively. In the long run, they will develop better and more productive relationships," he says.

Study for an International Career

Study abroad programs can segue smoothly into international careers.

"If the student is looking for a career that involves another country, he or she has to consider whether it's a career in government service, business of some kind, trade, journalism or scholarship," says Pollack. "Those are very different career directions, and they obviously have very different implications in terms of how one should prepare."

If you are interested in politics, consider a program that includes an internship as well as classroom work. If you are majoring in anthropology or marine biology, look into international programs that involve fieldwork and research.

"Even looking for work in the US, your study abroad experience is an important part of a resume," says Pollack. "It will say to potential employers that you are self-reliant and ready to take chances and approach things with a lot more self confidence and sharpened focus."

Networking

Connections can be the key to a successful job search, but this is often most true for hiring foreigners. Having someone in another country to attest to your comfort with cultural differences will be important to international employers.

While abroad, seek contacts with people who might help you later on. "Depending on what kind of career path you plan to take, you can lay a network of professional contacts that might prove very helpful down the road," says Pollack. Save all email addresses and phone numbers and keep in touch with your contacts.

When you study abroad, you can gain skills and understanding that may lead to a new career. "There isn't an industry or field that doesn't involve an international dimension," says Pollack.