

# **Study Abroad, International Internship and Experiential Learning: A World-Class Adventure in Learning**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Globalization! International competition! World-class! World-community! Diversity! These are all very powerful words we hear every day. Providing today's learners the opportunity to live these terms would surely provide a unique and life changing experience. Today's student's education is enhanced when it includes an international component allowing the learner to experience first hand the global business in a new learning environment. Out of necessity, curriculums are being changed to include courses and activities providing an element of international learning, including an international work experience. With the movement to a more complex global business, a greater understanding of the diversity and challenges presented by different cultures, nationalities, governments, businesses and organizational structures are needed. Research by Gray, Murdock, and Stebbins (2002) found study abroad programs have, in recent years, become increasingly legitimized as forms of experiential learning. At Purdue University, these types of programs have increasingly become popular, growing from 560 in 2002-03 to 840 in 2003-04, reflecting the need for a true experiential international experience. Over 1000 undergraduate students, graduate students and faculty members received an introduction to the true global community through Purdue's International Programs in the 2004-05 academic year promoting exceptional learning opportunities in a world-class setting. The internship experience provides a unique experiential international experience providing insights into international business, leadership, travel, education, finance, and culture. This session will explore the possibilities, the excitement and the mechanics to make the international experience a reality.*

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE INTERNATIONAL INTERNSHIP: AN EXPERIENTIAL- LEARNING OPPORTUNITY**

Study abroad is, by definition, always a learning experience. As Joplin (1995) states, however, "Experience alone is insufficient to be called experiential education, and it is the reflection process which turns experience into experiential education." Itin (1999) takes this idea one step

further, noting that experiential education involves “carefully chosen experiences supported by reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis structured to require the learner to take initiative, make decisions, and be accountable for the results.” The international internship goes beyond that and provides learning through a real world experience, a business world experience. Does the experiential learning experience really benefit the learner? As an experiential learning opportunity, could the international internship provide a vehicle for even greater enhanced learning? Is there an advantage in learning by doing than the learning that occurs in the traditional classroom?

John Dewey’s *Experience and Education* published in 1938 serves as a model and inspiration for progressive educators wanting to include an experiential component to education in the 1930s. We saw a resurgence of this again in the 1960s by those who wanted to introduce more experiential learning into the educational system. (Kraft, 1995) Dewey stated that teaching students with concrete experiences and then working with them to develop the thought processes with which to examine those experiences provide needed understanding for one to use their experience. (Crosby 1995) In essence, the learning taking place through the experiential experience does hold a unique advantage for the learner.

Today, students are seeking ways to add credibility to their resume and enhance their job prospects for professional employment upon graduation. Colleges and universities are seeking ways to enhance the learning experience for the student while also adding credibility to the total learning experience. Might the use of experiential learning and the international experience provide the desired creditability, learning, and desired experience in today’s global environment? The international internship experience certainly provides a vehicle for experiential learning, the international exposure, and a unique business experience. One should heed the advice from John Dewey, the genesis of the modern day experiential learning theorist.

Knowledge must be linked to experience, not set apart in “abstract, bookish” forms divorced from life. It must be grounded in “the depth of meaning that attaches to its coming within urgent daily interest.” Nevertheless – and here is Dewey’s caveat to educators – “mere activity does not constitute experience. Rather, experience involves both “trying,” an active component, and “undergoing,” a passive one. (Hutchings and Wutzdorff, 1998)

Study abroad programs have become increasingly legitimized as forms of experiential learning. (Gray, Murdock & Stubbins 2002) Study abroad programs take students beyond the familiar and the experience is turned into deep learning through a reflective assessment of the lessons learned. At Purdue University, students have the opportunity to study abroad in over 54 countries and the opportunity for internships has grown every year for the past five years. The goals of the international experience, in addition to an internship, are to help participants understand how cultures and societies function, identify local and international issues impacting the new culture, to experience interaction and dialog with others outside their normal sphere of influence, providing a world class education.

Two examples of experiential opportunities are the London, England, and Sydney, Australia, internships offered through the Purdue Study Abroad Program. The students participate in a

unique experiential learning experience that integrates formal academic preparation and the experience of working in a different culture. As a result, professional values, attitudes, experiences and skills are refined and enhanced. The experiences are real and they provide unique opportunities that would not be otherwise available. For example, students participating in the London Internship Program have worked with the Tower of London in marketing management, The Royal Automobile Club as an event planner, Royal Bank of Scotland in investment research, London Knights in training programs, Pringle of Scotland in retail, Royal Parks System in management, USA Today Europe in research, Victoria and Albert Museum in cataloging of museum items, JAC Travel in developing and conducting training for agents, BBC in news coordination, Chelsea Football Club working in video and marketing, and the list goes on and on. Examples of the Australian program would include work with the NSW State and Regional Development doing financial work; Sass and Bide, one of Australia's leading women's fashion labels; Sydney Convention and Visitors Bureau organizing for tourist events; and Ignite Health doing work in sports management and marketing.

Both programs combine a three-credit hour unpaid internship with a three-credit hour academic course over a six or eight-week period of time. The internship is unpaid due to the inability of getting work visas; however, many students are given the opportunity to continue in a paid status for the rest for the summer period with the company sponsoring the intern. In this case, the international internship program is designed to allow students to study and to work in an international setting, while developing an appreciation for the British or Australian culture; however, the possibilities are endless. As noted, several students are invited to stay beyond the internship period to continue their work and are then provided a salary, expenses, and housing. Many students are then offered the opportunity for full-time employment upon graduation.

Students from different Purdue colleges or schools participate. Students in the College of Liberal Arts may have internships in communication, English, history, political science, psychology, sociology, anthropology, visual and performing arts, art design, and theater. Students in the School of Management may work in various fields such as economics, accounting and finance, and in business strategy. Students in the College of Technology may work in industrial technology, computer, computer graphics, aviation technology, human resource management, or organizational leadership. Students in the College of Consumer and Family Sciences may internship in hospitality and tourism management, child development, consumer sciences, retail management, sales, family studies, and fashion design.

## **CASES IN POINT: EXAMPLES**

### ***Importance of being at the right place at the right time***

2001: This is the story of Evelyn (Efie) Wernickle. Efie is an accounting major in the School of Management, has trained for three years toward an accounting degree and now she is not sure she wants to have a career in accounting. As a result, she requested an internship in sales and marketing. Efie had interviewed with another organization in sales and marketing; but, due to her lack of training and experience, it just did not work out. Efie interviewed and was eventually placed with the London Knights, the city's ice hockey team. Efie spent the first four weeks of

her internship developing marketing ideas and trying to sell advertising to businesses in support of the London Knights; but, no one really wanted to listen or invest in advertising in a team that had not gained any significant following. Besides, this was the summer and hockey is a winter sport and, in London, not a very big one at that. Most deemed it as simply not a good use of their advertising pounds (dollars). During a slow time and during the absence of her supervisor, a staff accountant asked Efi to help audit invoices and assist in the filing. Her training in the business school had prepared her well for this and she excelled in this task. To the accountant's surprise and delight, Efi discovered the player salaries had been calculated incorrectly. The billing arrangement between the London Knights and the arena owned by Anschutz Sports Holdings was missing some account receivables for events and royalties revealed figures with the catering company responsible for providing refreshments were incomplete. The bottom line is Efi's work saved the London Knights about \$250,000. In appreciation, Efi was invited to attend the team's season-opening game in Geneva, Switzerland, all expenses paid, and was invited to interview for full-time employment upon graduation. Truly an international world class experience and by the way, Efi rediscovered accounting and decided to make that her career.

### ***Importance of Networking and Being Flexible***

2002: The second event shares a similar excitement. Carrie Long, a high-jumper for the Purdue University Track and Field team, was also working at an internship in London. Through her work, Carrie developed contacts with other organizations and began networking with other businesses. Toward the end of her internship, Carrie was approached by a different company to do some fashion modeling. Thinking it was a joke, she brushed the offer off. Fellow students encouraged her to follow through and give the opportunity a chance. Why not explore the opportunity? Carrie called and was offered the opportunity to model for Vidal Sassoon doing two shows while in London. After the two shows, Carrie was invited to stay in London an additional three weeks beyond the end of her internship to continue modeling for Vidal Sassoon. What a unique experiential learning opportunity! Carrie did stay the additional two weeks doing several shows gaining further experience and creating new networking opportunities. As with most students that participate in the international internship programs, she was challenged, her life was changed, and she grew as a result of this experiential learning experience.

## **ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS, OPPORTUNITIES, AND CHALLENGES**

### ***The European Atlantic Group Dinner***

2003: The effectiveness of the experiential learning experience reached beyond the internship and classroom experience in the international setting. Often opportunities present themselves in unique situations and events. One goal of the international experience is to prepare the learner to understand world affairs, international issues, and other cultures as seen through the political environment, economics, and global events. Knowledge and understanding of other cultures of the world promote better understanding and appreciation for one's own culture and diversity. Such an opportunity was part of the international experience for students in the London internship program in 2002 and 2003.

The students were working part-time at an internship about 20 hours per week and also taking a course in communication or leadership. One of the unique learning and memorable opportunities organized for the students in the *Culture Based Leadership* class was for the students to attend the European Atlantic Group Dinner and presentation. This was an opportunity for the students to meet and interact with foreign dignitaries, international business leaders, and international entrepreneurs. This dinner and event topic looked at *Turkey's Role Post Iraq*. Sir David Logan, former ambassador to Turkey from the United Kingdom, was the keynote speaker. The Turkish Ambassador also had an opportunity to share his nation's views and position. The 180 people in attendance included Lords and Ladies, Barons and Baronesses, world leaders in international business and government and a host of other international figures. The students not only got to hear and learn of the significance of world events, but they got the opportunity to actually interact with these leaders on somewhat of a personal level during the cocktail hour and the dinner. They explored and discussed the importance of understanding various cultures and leading with an international perspective. The students experienced the dynamics of international relationships first hand. These memories and lessons will last a lifetime. As a result of this program and the shared experience, several began exploring careers in governmental affairs, foreign affairs, and opportunities with the U.S. State Department. These life changing experiences were only made possible through the experiential learning in an international program.

### ***The Ceilidh***

2004: A stated goal for many international study abroad programs is to seek out and interact with the richness of diversity within all humanity – learning from other cultures to improve the richness in their own lives and communities. In 2004, in the Glasgow, Scotland program the students were presented with the opportunity to attend a ceilidh and, for some, this was truly an eye-opening and heart-warming event.

The ceilidh is a celebration of an event that includes traditional Scottish dance. Students participating in the Glasgow, Scotland Study Abroad Program were invited to the ceilidh being given to honor graduating students from the Strathclyde University School of Hotel Management and Tourism. This was an exceptional opportunity for the students to learn by doing and having some fun experiencing Scottish culture through dance. This was made even more interesting when it was discovered the graduating students were all Iranian students from a satellite campus in Tehran, Iran and had returned to Glasgow for a graduating ceremony. Thus we have a setting where Americans and Iranians are together to learn how to dance to Scottish music. Something just does not sound right; yet it provided a new appreciation for each other's culture and it worked very well. The American students learned how to dance the traditional Scottish Ceilidh with Iranian students as partners, providing the opportunity to explore each other's culture in some greater detail. About half-way through the ceilidh, the Scottish band took their obligatory break. During the break, an Iranian student put on a CD with Iranian music and the culture experience became electrifying. The Iranian students seized the opportunity and taught the American students and faculty to dance to the Iranian music. Culture barriers were removed, friendships were developed, and everyone had a great time learning and dancing. A new understanding and appreciation for each other's culture was discovered. This experience

certainly allowed for an enrichment opportunity in understanding the differences in people and culture that had been missing.

## **LEARNING OUTCOMES**

Students participating in an international experiential learning program overwhelmingly feel as if they have grown. Every student that participated experienced an increase in his or her self-confidence. One student, Brook, responded, “Overall, I learned a great deal from the internship and the experience. While in my internship I learned about working with other cultures. I also learned a bit about British culture. In my travels to other countries – France, Spain, Italy, and The Netherlands – I learned about other cultures and the diversity within the countries. But most of all, I learned more about myself. I definitely gained greater independence and self-confidence that I never thought that I was capable of having.”

One student, Juliet, working with a clothing sales and distribution organization noted on one marketing visit, “Today I placed an order for over 15,000 dresses. Can you believe that? I picked out the designs, order quantities, worked with the production people, and marketing people. It is interesting to see how they actually asked me to help guide them on something I just finished studying in class. I realized what I have to offer the company and I am very excited about the potential. I learned to not take the smallest skill sets for granted. I learned how much I didn’t know but also what I did know.”

### ***Other Study Abroad Opportunities***

Want to experience Oxford, England; Florence, Italy; Prague, Czech Republic; London, England; Glasgow, Scotland; Dublin, Ireland; Sydney, Australia; or a host of other international sites? The opportunities are vast, the potential is enormous, and the experience is priceless.

The Study Abroad Program normally takes place on the campus of a hosting university; in Glasgow, it is the University of Stathclyde; in Oxford, it is the Oriel College; in Florence, the program is housed in the Palazzo Galli-Tassi Palace; and in Prague, it is with Charles University. The Study Abroad Program offers the student up to six credit hours of instruction during the four to eight week study period, with instruction being delivered by award winning faculty from Purdue University and the host university. All of the programs offer weekly excursions to other urban, historical, political, or cultural sites enhancing the educational experience. The instruction occurs during three days of the week, normally Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday, with the excursion normally occurring on Wednesday. This schedule provides a three-day weekend allowing the student to travel, relax, or explore areas of interest – and maybe even find time to study and do some homework. The travel, the thrill of learning to communicate in another language, and finding one’s own way are very empowering. One student expressed it very well. “We had the chance to meet some great people that will not soon be forgotten. Their kindness and generous giving of self is over-powering. I had to ask myself if they would get the same treatment if they came to the United States. I am not so sure. Americans are raised speaking English, and only English. In all the countries I visited, the students were able to speak French, German, Spanish and also English. In this and other events, when one steps outside the

United States, one can see how much knowledge is out there and the need to know more if we are to be successful leaders in this world.”

## SUMMARY

The opportunities are great. The experiences are life changing. The lessons learned last a lifetime. According to Citron and Kline (2001), when study abroad programs employ experiences that carefully match the participant’s needs, goals, and expectations, the results can be life changing. More strategic integration of international programs, study abroad, and international internships need to be integrated into the college curriculum. Programs challenging students outside of their comfort zones, like international internships, provide new learning opportunities enhancing the total learner’s education. Students report phenomenal growth in self-confidence, understanding of different cultures, and communications. Students report learning so much about life in such a short period of time and many are given new and exciting opportunities as a result of the experience. Students report gaining the ability to see themselves as foreigners, providing a totally new insight when interacting with others. Students indeed become aware that they may hold a view of the world that is not universally shared. As a result, students learn to explore perceptions of the world as others see it, discovering the need for tolerance and empathy in the vast diversity of individuals. Without exception, every student returning from a study abroad program notes the experiences – the internship, travel and culture – have changed their life.

Some may argue that the study abroad experience is not consistent with the scholarly pursuits of higher education. These skeptics argue the time spent could be better spent doing research or developing even higher learning skills instead of taking a “vacation” abroad. It will be necessary to educate such critics about the research-supported validity of experiential international education. We must reach past ourselves to the other educators and educate them on the advantages of the experiential approach offered in an international internship program.

When asked how their experience in a study abroad program would give them a competitive advantage over those students who stayed home, the students overwhelmingly said that the exposure to different cultures as well as the opportunity to participate in personal development opportunities such as problem solving while working with international organizations gave them the skills that they will need when looking for a job. As the world gets smaller and decision making gets faster, students with the study abroad experience will be noticed. The students with the international internship experience will be first in line to become leaders. They will already have the self-confidence and ability to deal with unpredictable situations in a broad setting. They have gained greater independence, understanding of other cultures, a proven ability to “think on their feet,” and better organizational and communication skills. Rachel Humphry, a student in the 2003 London Internship program, sums up the program and the experience, “This experience will change me forever. Everyone should do this!”

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