

Advice for Parents of Overseas-Bound College Students

by William Hoffa

The idea of traveling to other countries as part of one's higher education is nothing new. Scholars have been enriching their higher education through travel for centuries. What is different today is that study abroad is no longer a luxury for the rich, but instead, a reality for students who want to become prepared for the challenges of the twenty-first century.

As a parent of a college or college-bound student, you may find yourself in the role of helping your child think through the many questions and issues she will face in making this often life-changing decision. Though decisions about when, where, and what to study overseas are usually made by students themselves, there are many supporting roles for parents to play to help their child in deciding whether to go, choosing a program, preparing for departure, ensuring a rewarding experience while abroad, and adjusting to life back at home.

Here are some important considerations about choosing a program, determining when to go, and preparing to get the most out of the experience.

Timing: When to Study Abroad?

Study abroad used to mean a commitment to a full year of living and learning abroad, usually during the junior year. But now short-term options abound, some as short as three weeks, so students can find excellent programs that match the amount of time they can afford to be away from their home campus.

There is plenty to be said for thinking about participating earlier rather than later. Although the "junior year abroad" model is still the most popular, students who study abroad in their freshman or sophomore years often get a head start on some of the soul searching and career planning that comes with overseas travel. On the other hand, the curricular strengths of study abroad programs suggest that the experience is ideally suited to juniors and seniors who have chosen an academic concentration and are seeking ways to deepen and diversify it in ways not possible on campus.

The Importance of Fit

Students who need structure, guidance, discipline, and encouragement should opt for a classroom-centered program with strong on-site support staff and planned enrichment activities. Students who are already adventurous, independent, resourceful, and prepared intellectually and linguistically may choose a direct-enrollment, full-immersion program or an independent internship. Most students fall somewhere between these extremes and will be best served by programs that offer support as well as opportunities for independence.

Duration: How Long to Study Abroad?

A truism of campus advisers, one affirmed by returning students, is that the longer the program, the greater the intellectual and personal impact, in terms of academic benefit, cross-cultural understanding, career preparation, and maturation. Long-term, fully-integrated programs are much more likely to provide students with the cross-cultural skills employers seek. Alternatively, the availability of shorter programs makes study abroad a possibility for students who previously

could not have considered it for time or financial reasons. Long or short, the most important thing is that the program's goals be commensurate with the time allotted for their accomplishment. Parents are right to be suspicious of programs that seem to claim or promise too much, and they can play an important role in assisting their son or daughter to question such claims.

Location

Europe continues to be the most popular destination for American students heading overseas, but more and more students are choosing to study all over the world. There are many reasons for your daughter or son to choose to live and learn in a European location especially if she or he has made linguistic or other academic preparations for such study. But good grounds exist for choosing programs in non Western regions. Study in a culture that is dramatically different from that of the West can be especially eye opening and rewarding for students. Obviously, somewhat different considerations of cost, transportation, communications, ethnicity, language, safety, and health can come into play for students and parents considering programs in such locations.

Study, Work, or Both?

While most students going overseas participate in programs designed to fulfill their academic goals and obligations, a smaller proportion travel overseas primarily to gain practical experience, learn new skills, and increase their career prospects. About 10,000 U.S. students annually participate in noncredit work overseas programs with a strong experiential emphasis.

Financial Aid

The amount of financial assistance available to families of students wishing to study abroad is likely to depend on one or more of the following considerations:

- The financial aid package currently being received for home campus study
- The commitment of the student's home institution to fostering study abroad opportunities and extending financial aid to such preparation
- The economic ability of the home institution to support such a commitment
- The amount of additional aid for which students might be qualified for overseas study
- Full-time enrollment and participation in an approved program that can be defended as part of degree studies
- Additional scholarship aid that may be available from private or public sources.

Parents and students will usually benefit from working as closely as possible with the campus financial aid office. At the very least, your son or daughter should make an appointment with the individual responsible for processing aid for study abroad as soon as he or she becomes serious about studying abroad. The study abroad adviser on campus can provide encouragement, guidance, and possibly information on scholarship help.

Scholarships

Most study abroad offices have on their shelves at least some resources that describe scholarships available for undergraduate study abroad. Unless you can get to the campus, however, your son or daughter, with the assistance of the study abroad adviser, will have to do the basic research to identify possibilities. A World Wide Web resource that parents can access directly is [The Financial Aid Information Page](#). [The University of Minnesota Online Study Abroad Directory](#) has over 200 relevant entries. These two sources represent a good overview of aid sources and are a good starting point for more specialized searches.

Safety

Study abroad programs cannot guarantee the absolute safety of participants or ensure that risk will not at times be greater than at home. Nor can they monitor the daily personal decisions, choices, and activities of individual participants any more than is the case on the home campus. However, most overseas study programs recognize their responsibility to do their utmost to provide a secure and safe environment in which your son or daughter can live and learn. Responsible campuses and programs consult regularly with colleagues around the country who are involved in the administration of study abroad programs; with resident program directors; with responsible officials of foreign host universities; with contacts in the US Department of State and other agencies; and with other experts who are well informed on issues and events. For information on what parents can do to optimize safety during study abroad, visit the [NAFSA](#) web site.

With a little care and effort and a good deal of advance planning, it is almost always possible to identify study abroad programs that match a student's learning style and academic goals at an affordable price.

About the Author

William Hoffa is the Principal Consultant of Academic Consultants International, where he works with colleges and universities to globalize their campuses. He is an active member of NAFSA and is well-known as an expert in education abroad with numerous publications, such as "NAFSA'S Guide to Education Abroad: For Advisers and Administrators," "Study Abroad: A Guide for Parents," and the forthcoming "Crisis Management in a Cross Cultural Setting." He is currently working on the "History of American Study Abroad." Dr. Hoffa also teaches in the International and Intercultural Management Masters Program at the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont. He has held positions as Professor of English and American Studies at Vanderbilt University, Kirkland College, and Hamilton College, was Senior Fulbright Lecturer to the University of Jyvaskyla, Finland (1974-75), and was National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow, University of New Mexico (1978-79). He has served as Executive Director of Scandinavian Seminar (Inc.) and Field Director of Academic Programs for the Council on International Educational Exchange. Dr. Hoffa holds academic degrees from Michigan, Harvard, and Wisconsin.

Bill Hoffa (Academic Consultants International) is the author of Study Abroad: A Parent's Guide. Bulk orders and single copies are available from NAFSA Publications, 800-836-4994, or 412-741-1142.