WHERE TO NEXT?

CAREER PATHWAYS

Most returned study abroad students extoll the intellectual, cultural, and personal growth they gained from their international experiences, but many are unsure how to explain this to prospective employers; some even doubt such an experience has any value at all in the "real world." Yet more and more employers are seeking candidates with the very skills students gain while abroad. This is great news for the increasing number of students who are interested in charting rewarding career paths that build upon their international experiences.

Need inspiration for your own career-mapping? From academic backgrounds as diverse as anthropology, biology, economics, education, engineering, international relations, literature, political science, public health, and more, the stories and interviews in this section are living proof that study abroad alumni have forged interesting and meaningful careers that have benefited from their international experiences. Some followed a straight path while others meandered, but all agree that studying abroad significantly shaped their future career decisions.

This section was coordinated by Andrea Licavoli, Ela Rossmiller, Shannon Adducci, and Sherry Schwarz. Andrea Licavoli studied abroad twice as an undergraduate student at Michigan State University; she recently completed the Communication and Rhetorical Studies master’s program at Syracuse University, where she studied the topic of "student sojourner identity transitions" and worked as the Assistant to the Director of Programs at Syracuse University Abroad. Ela Rossmiller is the Director of Faculty-Led Programs at the Padnos International Center at Grand Valley State University. Shannon Adducci is a recent graduate from Northwestern University, where she studied journalism and Spanish. Sherry Schwarz is Founder and Director of The Abroad View Foundation.
CAREER BENEFITS
understanding & articulating the skills you gained abroad

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Much has been written about the “global economy,” but its influence on the job market for new graduates is just beginning to be understood. In a globalized workplace, most employees live and work in their home country but use technology to customize products and services for clients worldwide, communicate with suppliers, or collaborate on projects with overseas offices. Communications technology, particularly the Internet, has been key to accelerating the pace of globalization. The result is that many new college graduates will join the ranks of “domestic internationals,” employees whose international careers are based in their home countries. Although you may be immersed in many foreign cultures as a part of your daily job without even stepping foot overseas, there is evidence that experience working abroad enhances the cross-cultural competency that employers seek when hiring college graduates for a global job market.

According to a 10-year-old report issued by the RAND Corporation and the then-College Placement Council (now NACE), employers for globalized jobs cited four major sets of criteria they use when evaluating job candidates: cross-cultural competencies; knowledge of a specific field; interpersonal skills such as problem solving, decision-making, and communication skills; and, previous work experience.

It is worth noting that employers were more interested in the skills that students developed to adapt to a new culture rather than the particular international experience of the student. The assumption was that what a student learned about adapting to living, studying, or working in Germany, for example, could be applied to working with a multinational team based in Asia.

A RAND Corporation study of the expectations of managers hiring for multinational companies and nonprofit organizations, completed 10 years after the earlier study, asked respondents to rank 19 characteristics in order of importance for success in international organizations. While this study did not focus specifically on the college job market, the top five characteristics are consistent with the 1994 study and, indeed, with most lists of what employers seek from recent college graduates:
1. General cognitive skills (e.g., problem solving, analytical ability)
2. Interpersonal and relationship skills
3. Ambiguity tolerance, adaptivity
4. Personal traits (e.g., character, self-reliance, dependability)
5. Cross-cultural competence (ability to work well in different cultures and with people of different origins)
6. Ability to work in teams
7. Ability to think in policy and strategy terms
8. Written and oral English language skills
9. Minority sensitivity
10. Innovative, able to take risks
11. Empathy, non-judgmental perspective
12. Substantive knowledge in a technical or professional field
13. Multidisciplinary orientation
14. Knowledge of international affairs, geographic area studies
15. Competitiveness, drive
16. General educational breadth
17. Internet and information technology competency
18. Managerial training and experience
19. Foreign language fluency

Students who have studied, worked, or volunteered abroad would do well to articulate how their experiences prepared them with the above-mentioned skills valued by employers. The following are examples of some of the key benefits students report:

- **Cultural immersion:** If you worked, interned, or volunteered abroad, it is likely you were the only American, or one of a few, working and living fully immersed in the setting. You probably had no choice but to do what the locals do.

- **Personal development:** Working and studying abroad likely challenged and strengthened your self-confidence, independence, tolerance, empathy, flexibility, adaptability, pragmatic know-how, and cultural insights.

- **Cross-cultural learning:** If you worked,
volunteered, or interned abroad, you likely had the opportunity to meet host-country nationals; you probably also experienced differences in social organization, such as class and cultural distinctions.

- **Language learning:** If you were in a foreign-language only setting or in a work experience, you probably found the give-and-take—and the immediate feedback—of communication was enormously beneficial in learning your foreign language of study. Work-abroad participants especially demonstrate dramatic gains in their language skills.

This is a challenging era of globalization, which exerts pressures on everyone in the work force. If you haven't already, you can do much to prepare yourself to compete in this global environment by gaining international experience through unprecedented opportunities for obtaining such experience by studying or working abroad as an undergraduate or shortly after graduating. However, you should seek initial guidance from academic and career advisers in deciding which international experiences fit best with your career goals. Just as importantly, upon your return, meet with a career adviser to gain help in articulating how your overseas experience(s) have enhanced your skills in ways that are meaningful to employers.

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**leveraging your overseas experiences**

The following tips can help you leverage your time abroad to benefit your future career path:

- **Make a list of alumni living in your destination country.** The alumni affairs or career services offices can provide you with these lists, and many overseas alumni organizations have their own websites. Overseas alumni can be a useful resource for you to both learn more about particular career areas and also to obtain useful job leads for full-time or summer opportunities.

- **Keep a contacts notebook.** You should develop a record keeping system to track the names, address, and e-mails of people you meet. You may not realize the value of a contact until after you have returned home, and you will appreciate having a record of who you met.

- **If participating in a homestay, use every opportunity to talk with your host family about the local economy.** The more knowledgeable you become about the local market, the easier it will be for you to adopt a reasonable approach to finding a job.

- **Pay attention to jobs listed in local newspapers and publications.** These resources can be very useful for determining the employment sectors that have the greatest demand.

- **If considering graduate school in your destination country, obtain application materials while abroad.** Program representatives may be willing to meet with you to discuss particular degrees. If you are considering applying for postgraduate scholarships such as the Fulbright you should definitely research graduate schools.

- **Find out how other people found their jobs.** The best way to learn how to find a job overseas is to ask other Americans who have been successful with finding an international job how they did it. Alumni of course, are good people to ask, but so are the other American expatriates whom you will meet in the course of studying abroad.

- **Meet with the Career Center staff before going abroad.** Your college’s Career Services staff can advise you about how to manage your job, internship, and graduate school deadlines that will come due while you are out of the country. Additionally, a career counselor can help you devise a job search strategy to take advantage of contacts you make while abroad and help you market your experiences when you return.

- **Keep in touch with useful contacts.** E-mail makes it very easy to periodically touch base with the interesting people you met while abroad in order to keep your network alive. AV

—Cheryl Matherly and William Nolting

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**Cheryl Matherly**  
**Career Title:**  
Associate Dean for Global Education and Applied Assistant Professor of Education at the University of Tulsa

**Recommended Resource:**  
*How to Get a Job in Europe* by Cheryl Matherly and Robert Sanborn  

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**William Nolting**  
**Career Title:**  
Director of the Overseas Opportunities Office at the Univ. of Michigan International Center; Co-Chair of the Subcommittee on Work, Internships & Volunteering Abroad for NAFSA: Association of International Educators

**Recommended Websites for Working Abroad and International Careers:**  
www.internationalcenter.umich.edu/swt/work;  
www.nafsa.org/wivaresources