

Chapter 1

All Abroad! Getting the Lowdown on Studying Abroad

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The best way to learn about another country's customs, languages, and people is to live in that country for an extended period of time. And what better time to do this than while you're a student. Just think, when else will you be able to earn credit for living and learning outside the U.S.? Study abroad is an amazing adventure in which you're learning all the time: both inside and outside the classroom.

With the rapid advancements in communication, transportation, and economics (to name a few), the world has become more connected and increasingly international in scope. These changes affect nearly everyone, even you! Your living space is no longer confined to your city, town, or country: You live in the world, and therefore, to achieve success on a personal, intellectual, and professional level, you have to interact with people of other cultures and think about issues on a global scale.



Studying abroad prepares you to take your place in the world by teaching you cultural awareness and respect. It also increases your self-awareness, particularly how you see yourself in relation to the rest of the world. International education not only advances learning and scholarship, but it encourages cross-cultural communication and prepares students for leadership roles in a global community.

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Why Bother Going Abroad?

Once you've gotten through the first year at your home university, you probably feel like you finally know all the buildings on campus, can find your way around town, know which professors to avoid, which dining hall is busiest at lunch, and of course, have made plenty of friends. So why leave this cozy little environment you've created for yourself just to go back to being the new kid on the block? Because your experience abroad is definitely worth the few trials and tribulations of starting over!

Think of study abroad as just an extension of your studies at your home university. Your time away should be an integrated part of your four-year undergraduate academic plan. When you go abroad, you will likely take courses that, in some way, build on or add to the courses you are taking at your home university. Study abroad is also a great time to begin independent research projects. Increasing numbers of students conduct research abroad and then work with faculty members when they return to convert their projects into senior theses.

Ready, set, grow!

Studying abroad definitely challenges you on a personal level. Whether you consciously realize it or not, you develop a greater self-confidence, independence, and self-reliance. By the time you return home, you may feel like a super hero: You can do anything!

Studying abroad may be the first time you are truly away from home — all your familiar surroundings here in the U.S., as well as friends and family. While this isn't always easy, most students agree that the benefits of giving up your familiar environment for a short period of time far outweigh the reasons to stay at home. Believe it or not, if you immerse yourself in a new culture, experiment with new ways of thinking, or try a different way of living, you naturally experience some sort of personal growth. After you master your new culture and the abroad academic life, you will return home much wiser and probably slightly impressed with yourself for having had a successful time abroad.

Changing your perspective

If you go abroad with an open mind, then you're certain to return to the U.S. a more enlightened person. One of the major benefits of studying abroad is its ability to broaden your world understanding and perspective on just about anything. You gain a different view of international affairs, from politics to

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economics to social issues. You also return with a deeper understanding and respect for your host country, knowing how another culture approaches daily life and unusual challenges.

You may also return with a new appreciation for the U.S. Living in another culture can help you understand your own on a deeper level. You may return grateful for the way of life in the U.S., its political system, or its foreign or domestic policies. Through your interactions with your abroad professors, your new peer group, and other foreign or U.S. students on your program, you can find out what others think about the U.S. (and this is usually both positive and negative).

The top ten reasons to go abroad

For those of you who don't want to be bothered with lengthy explanations about the wonders of studying away from home, here's the abbreviated argument for studying abroad:

- ✔ You learn about yourself in new ways and gain self-confidence, independence, and cross-cultural skills.
- ✔ Studying abroad changes your perspective on the world. You're introduced to new cultures and a new way of life.
- ✔ Studying abroad changes your perspective on the United States. You experience an educational system different from that of the U.S. and learn how other cultures and countries view the U.S. You may even learn what it means to be an "American" and what makes life in the U.S. different from life abroad.
- ✔ You can earn home university course credit in many countries. You may be able to fulfill graduation requirements. Some programs may correspond nicely with your major or minor.
- ✔ Studying abroad gives you a unique opportunity to learn another language or improve your existing language skills, as well as meet your home university's foreign language requirements.
- ✔ Studying abroad is flexible! You can find programs that work with your curriculum and time schedule. You don't even need to know another language. And lots of programs are out there, so you can find one that works for you.
- ✔ You increase your career opportunities in the global marketplace. Most employers prefer to hire graduates with some abroad experience. If you've traveled and can show you're knowledgeable about the world, you have the competitive edge.
- ✔ A semester, summer, or year abroad can give you the opportunity to participate in an international internship and gain hands-on experience in a foreign country.
- ✔ You meet some great new friends and people you never would have encountered if you stayed in the U.S. Some of them may be lifelong friends who will invite you to visit them again. You may even find yourself "adopted" by your host family.
- ✔ Travel to see places you've only dreamed about! You get to experience cities and countries you've only seen in books, on TV, on postcards, or in films.

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While abroad, a new academic interest or perspective on your major may emerge. Studying at an abroad university allows you to study subjects that aren't available at your home university. For example, I studied Irish History from the years 1500 to 2000 while I was studying in Ireland, a course not offered at my home university. Other U.S. students took classes in Celtic civilization or Gaelic.

You also study familiar subjects but from a different cultural perspective. For example, if you study international relations in France, it will be from a European perspective. Alternatively, studying the U.S. and American history from a different country's point of view can be fun. And, of course, all your classroom learning is enhanced by living in your abroad location and interacting with host families, housemates, roommates, or friends who are native to your abroad country.

Jump-starting your career

Studying abroad typically gives your resume a nice boost and improves your post-graduate employment prospects, particularly if you're considering a career in business, international affairs, or government service. Nowadays, employers actively seek college graduates who have spent time studying abroad because they want employees with an international knowledge base as well as foreign language skills.

The same international skills that make you more marketable for employment are also valued by graduate schools. These skills include cross-cultural communication skills, analytical skills, teamwork, flexibility, an understanding of cultural contexts, the ability to adapt to new circumstances and deal with differences, a developed view of the world outside the U.S., independence, and self-confidence.

Experiencing a different education system

Institutions of higher education outside the U.S. function differently than what you're accustomed to. Even if your program is directed by a U.S.-based school, your experience can still differ because U.S.-based programs often employ local professors.

In the U.S., most students pay to go to college. It's kind of a pay-for-service model in which students pay for the education and in return expect their professors to conduct lectures, foster class discussion, hold office hours, and so on. This isn't usually the case in other parts of the world. If students don't pay for school or if the government (maybe through taxes) subsidizes tuition, then students don't feel as entitled. The tables are turned. Students have the privilege of going to school and therefore, it is up to them to take responsibility for their own learning.

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A couple of reasons why NOT to go abroad

You should not approach studying abroad as a stress-free vacation from school. While the academics may be easier for you while you're abroad, you're actively learning during most of your waking hours. You'll have stressful moments, such as speaking a foreign language in the

grocery store, adapting to your new home, or finding the bus stop.

You should not approach study abroad as an escape route from problems at home or at your home university. Most likely, the same problems will still exist when you return to the U.S.

Abroad universities are much less focused on grades. They care more about learning to increase understanding and knowledge. Therefore, you can expect much more of a lecture format to your classes and not much (if any) class discussion or participation. You can also expect to have less one-on-one interaction with your professors. (Professors at your abroad university may not even be required to hold weekly office hours.) However, the flexibility of curriculums abroad often gives students at abroad universities more freedom to explore their own interests within a course than would be allowed or even feasible in the U.S.



The difference in set ups between your home university and your host university doesn't mean you should assume that academics are easier abroad.

All these differences don't mean that the education you receive while you're abroad is better or worse than the education you get at your home university — it's just bound to be different. If you don't like your abroad classroom or learning style, chalk it up to a learning experience. Accept the challenge to learn in a different way, in a different cultural setting.



Before you take the plunge, think about your own personal reasons for wanting to go abroad because when you return from studying abroad, you'll assess whether you achieved your goals or hopes for studying abroad. Whatever your reasons for studying abroad, make sure that they are not only attainable, but also positive. For example, learning a second language, studying about another culture, diversifying your studies, preparing for graduate school, or traveling to meet new people are all good reasons to study abroad.

Studying Abroad: An Overview

Studying abroad can be the best part of your college experience, provided you avoid planning your semester or year away the night before you leave. Your study abroad journey is bound to be full of plans, decisions, challenges,

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and maybe even a mistake or two. (Mistakes are okay, as long as you learn something from them.) Keep in mind that studying abroad is enough of a project that the *For Dummies* people asked me to write an entire book about it.

Your study abroad sojourn begins the minute you walk past the study abroad office and take a look inside, or when you meet an upperclassman who just returned from a semester in Europe, or when a professor tells you your Italian would greatly benefit from a semester in Italy, or maybe when you see the beautiful beaches of Australia on the big screen. Once the study abroad seed has been planted in your head, all you need to do is consult this book to find out how to turn that “hey, I’d like to study abroad” thought into a reality.

So pull up a chair and get started with this quick overview of what it takes to get yourself abroad. Your study abroad adventure is only a few pages away.

In the beginning

First things first. You’re going to have to postpone your dreams of cruising along the Riviera sipping iced tea for a moment while you check out your home university’s study abroad policies. When should you go? (See Chapter 2.) How can the study abroad office help you? What if your university doesn’t have a study abroad office? What are important dates to remember for studying abroad? (See Chapter 3.) What about foreign languages — how well do you really need to speak Chinese before leaving? How will you finish your major? (See Chapter 4.)

Another huge part of going abroad is deciding where to go. This can be fun, but also stressful. Your home university may offer its own study abroad programs that perfectly suit your needs. However, you may need to go searching for a program. And believe me, there are plenty of programs to sort through. The Internet has endless information on programs, so you’re much better starting with small, familiar resources like your study abroad office or recent study abroad alums at your home university (see Chapter 5). You also need to consider what to study while you’re abroad. Typically science majors or premed-track students have more difficulty with finding an appropriate abroad program (see Chapter 7). Studying in a country outside Europe can also be dramatically different from anything you’ve ever experienced before (see Chapter 24). Going abroad to the United Kingdom is also an option with many quirks (see Chapter 8).



You may get so wrapped up in the excitement going abroad that you forget all about having to study. So pay attention to Chapter 6 to ensure that your abroad experience doesn’t cost you any credits or delay your graduation date.

The study abroad process is full of the typical headaches that come with applying to any school, namely filling out applications and making plans on how to finance your adventure. These two tasks are much simpler than what you went through when you applied to undergraduate schools though. Applications tend to be less involved and financing should be easy if you're used to dealing with the financial aid offices. For more information on all these issues, check out the chapters in Part III.

Diving in

After you're into a program and ready to get on a plane, you still have loads of details to take care of, including figuring out where to live (if your program does not include housing), which courses to take, getting a passport, applying for a visa, and booking your flights (see Chapters 11 and 12). And then there's the guaranteed to be overwhelming task of packing! You get two suitcases that can weigh somewhere from 40 to 70 pounds each (depending on your airline), and that is all you can take for your semester or year abroad. How does one decide what to pack? I help you out with that in Chapter 13.

Chapters 16, 17, and 18 contain a lot of practical information that you may want to peruse before you get to your abroad country. Chapter 16 discusses everything you need to know about money, including credit cards, budgets, and best places to exchange currency. Health and safety are two other areas you need to pay attention to if you're going abroad. The best rule I can give you about safety is to use your common sense, but you can also find some other tips in Chapter 17 that may not be so familiar to you. The chapter about staying healthy abroad (Chapter 18) is not intended to turn you into a hypochondriac. Just be aware that you may run into some illnesses when you travel outside the United States. Staying safe and healthy keeps your abroad experience a pleasurable one.

Chapter 14 gets you through those first weeks or months in your abroad country. I give you some tips on settling into your new home quickly, especially if you only have a day or two before classes begin. If you're living with a host family or have roommates from your abroad country, Chapter 15 on crossing cultures should help you deal with adjusting to people, places, and situations that seem very foreign to you (at least initially).

Resuming life at home

Time flies when you're having fun, and your time abroad is guaranteed to be over before you know it. Sometimes coming home is much more difficult than going abroad. You need to, once again, pack a large amount of stuff into two suitcases. And you probably have more stuff this time around, because you'll

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have purchased fun things, like souvenirs, and collected notes, books, and papers that need to return to the U.S. with you. You also need to make sure you're not bringing anything home that could be illegal! (See Chapter 19.) Once you settle back in to your familiar routine at your home university, you may experience a bout of reverse culture shock. It seems hard to believe, but adjusting back to your native culture can be difficult! Don't worry, in Chapter 20, I give you some strategies for dealing with this. And, for those of you who want to go abroad again, check out Chapter 21 and start brainstorming.

Just for fun

Finally, in the last few pages of the book, I take a break from all the technical details and things to remember to give you some creative and fun ideas about places to visit and nontraditional places to study and a heads up about some unique opportunities out there (see the chapters in Part VI). I also throw in a few reasons to consider pursuing your graduate education outside of the U.S. (see Chapter 25).