

# Best Practices in Study Abroad: A Primer for Chairs of Departments of Foreign Languages

FOREIGN language departments face a new challenge and opportunity brought about by the conviction, shared by students and administrators alike, that study abroad is a fundamental experience of the undergraduate education. What follows is a brief guide to best practices in study abroad, written by members of the executive committee of the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages (ADFL) specifically for the use of chairs of foreign language departments. Our aim is to help department chairs make the best choices for their students and faculty members, given the many types of institutions of higher education in this country, the resources available to them, and the various models for study abroad. While in the past programs abroad were under the purview of the language and literature faculties, including English, they have now become a centralized enterprise that universities use to provide an international dimension to undergraduate education, as well as to outsource some of their teaching. Before, most students studying abroad were language and literature majors, but now all disciplines are represented. Many foreign language departments have lost control over the location, quality, and content of these programs. It is the task of the department chair to define the study-abroad experience so that it is meaningful and productive for a wide array of students, while still stressing the acquisition of other languages, the understanding and enjoyment of other cultures, and the difficult process of turning the foreign into the familiar and the familiar into the foreign.

Some of the successful models of the past have become less attractive for many students. A year abroad in a program administered by the home university, where all the courses are carefully vetted by the home department and where all students are from the university or part of a consortium, is still effective and to be recommended (see Kubler); but increasing numbers of students are looking to study for shorter stays, in cities or countries where there

are no home programs, or at a local university attended by native students.

Part of our common task is to recognize that now the whole university has an interest and a say in programs abroad. We are seeing art programs in Italy, environmental studies in Costa Rica, architecture programs in Berlin, and so on, for which language may not be a requirement. It is to our benefit to create alliances with the departments that offer such programs, so that language and culture continue to have an important place in the experience abroad.

Foreign language departments are finding themselves in the position of evaluating courses taken in an ever-increasing number of programs abroad in many locations. This task is impossible for any faculty member to do properly, and it seems unnecessary to attempt to conduct this assessment individually. Given that many of our students have traveled and even lived abroad for extended periods, it has become possible and even desirable to expand other types of opportunities abroad, such as internships, which are not strictly in an academic setting.

In addition, it would be useful to evaluate the effect of shorter stays, since these may be the only way many of our students are able to study abroad, often because of the requirements in their major. If such stays are productive and motivate students to continue their study of language and culture, we should share models for these shorter programs, which are more experimental, varied, and less well-known than the traditional junior-year-abroad model.

## Ownership and Collaboration

While language and literature departments certainly need to promote their own interests in study abroad, it is increasingly important to recognize the other institutional stakeholders in the field,

understand their concerns, and work with them to ensure a successful experience for students.

Language and literature department chairs must have a voice in matters of study abroad. They should know the key players on their campuses and should be proactive in establishing relationships with them. The creation of a campuswide (or systemwide) study-abroad committee, which would include representation from each of the stakeholders, could be one way of ensuring good communication and a consistent policy across the campus. In departmentally designed and operated study-abroad programs with language and cultural proficiency as clearly defined goals, the department should expect to make those goals transparent to study-abroad offices, deans, registrars, and other appropriate administrators. In contexts where other institutional entities operate study-abroad programs, department chairs should advocate for the importance of language study to campus goals of internationalization and for the inclusion of significant experience in the target language for programs in countries where English is not the primary language. If other institutional offices expect language departments to award credit for language study, the department should be included in processes for evaluating those courses. The department should reserve the right to decline awarding credit if nondepartmental language courses fail to meet departmental standards.<sup>1</sup>

### **Integrating Study Abroad into Home Curricula**

Students and faculty members often perceive little fit between study abroad and their home curriculum. Courses taken abroad frequently do not count toward major and degree requirements or do not offer the same quality of education. Even students of foreign languages—often double majors—who study abroad sometimes return to find few courses or other curricular options that can connect with or capitalize on their experience abroad. It is therefore imperative to ensure that study abroad is integrated in nonsuperficial ways into the home curriculum. The monograph “Internationalizing Undergraduate Education: Integrating Study Abroad into the Curriculum,” published in 2005 by the University of Minnesota Learning Abroad Center, contains a wealth of useful information and examples of ways in which foreign language departments can work to achieve better integration of study abroad into the

home curriculum. Culled from that monograph and elsewhere are the following recommendations:

- Involve faculty members from other departments or academic units in choosing courses and programs abroad that best fit the educational needs and curricular trajectories of their students.
- Seek out complementary experiences, such as opportunities for integrated study, internships, service learning, or research that connect to a variety of majors.
- Ensure that students receive extensive predeparture advising to prepare them for the challenging experience of living and studying abroad and reentry advising to help them understand and integrate their experience abroad on their return home.
- Develop predeparture and reentry courses, possibly team-taught with faculty members from other disciplines, that engage the theories and practices of cross- and intercultural transitions (see “International Undergraduate Education” for examples from a variety of institutions).
- Develop mechanisms that allow for interchanges between students at home institutions and students studying abroad.
- Develop mechanisms to maintain contact with students while they are abroad.
- Use students returning from study abroad in on-campus courses and cocurricular events.
- Ensure that study abroad appears in advisory and informational materials of academic offices throughout the institution.

### **Language Proficiency and Program Models**

A growing body of evidence supports the intuitive view that students make more significant gains in their foreign language proficiency and cultural knowledge when studying in a country where the language is spoken than they do studying only in classrooms at home. Nevertheless, there are differing views on the optimal preparatory language study that students should have before studying abroad. Students’ levels of proficiency increase more dramatically if they begin their overseas study with background in the target language (see Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsberg) because they are able to take immediate advantage of the foreign language environment. Foreign language majors, or students wishing to achieve a high level of proficiency, are likely to benefit most by enrolling directly in courses offered at

universities abroad. Such enrollment requires a minimum of two years of language study before departure, and possibly longer in more difficult languages, such as those that do not use the Latin alphabet.

There can also be advantages for beginning language study in the country where it is spoken: students can experience faster and deeper language acquisition and are likely to be motivated to continue their study of the language and culture on their return. Moreover, direct enrollment is not always advisable or feasible in some countries. Given different student goals and different types and lengths of study-abroad programs, it is difficult to make recommendations regarding predeparture language proficiency levels. It is of utmost importance, however, to ensure that second language acquisition be integrated meaningfully into students' study-abroad experience. Students should receive the kind of second-language instruction abroad that takes full advantage of the opportunities to engage the foreign culture, and they should be adequately prepared to interact in the second language acquisition environment in a way that optimizes their learning experience.

### Transfer Credit

Academic credit toward the degree at the home institution should be awarded for course work completed abroad. Determination of course equivalency at the home institution for courses to be taken abroad should be made by the relevant academic program head or designated representative. To the extent possible, approval should be sought by the student before departure to ensure the smooth transfer of credit.

### Financial Aid

Whenever possible, students' financial aid (whether institutional, private, state, or federal) should be portable. Students should be able to rely on financial aid for approved study-abroad programs just as they do on the home campus. Financial aid for study abroad functions most smoothly when department chairs work with financial aid officers to manage students' financial needs for study abroad.

While Web sites such as those of the Institute of International Education (see, e.g., [Study Abroad](#)

[Funding](#)) can be useful to students, institutions should make assistance available to students locally for determining appropriate sources of financial aid for study abroad.

Development officers should seek out donors interested in funding scholarships and endowments that target study-abroad goals.

### Types of Programs

Today study-abroad program operations of United States colleges and universities tend to fall into two broad categories:

- Institution-operated, in which schools run the support services, send faculty members to manage and teach courses, or work in conjunction with foreign universities and their facilities and faculties
- Outsourced programs, in which schools send faculty members and rely on an agent to provide lodging, support services, and sometimes all instruction

Institution-operated programs can have higher overhead costs unless there is a continuous program with a sufficient number of students, but in this mode the institution has more direct control of all aspects of the program.

Outsourced programs may offer liability protection, a variety of services, and tailored elements, but they are often run by directors for whom academic matters are secondary to the bottom line.

Schools should carefully evaluate what they want and can afford. A school planning an institution-operated program should be aware that foreign law and real estate can be daunting.

Outsourcing requires careful investigation of the providers. Agents often bring faculty members and administrators for whirlwind tours of facilities and visits with faculty members in the foreign locale. It is important to talk with other schools that have used a provider's services and to determine roughly the profit margin of proposed programs. Few, if any, of these providers are not-for-profit, and contract terms need to be very specific and clear.

There are many options for study abroad.

- *Study tours*: often very brief, typically two to four weeks, during the winter break or right after the end of the second semester. These tours can be helpful for increasing motivation and building

enrollments, but they may not provide sufficient educational value.

- *Intensive summer abroad*: six to ten weeks in a program with other foreign students. If well run and truly intensive (at least four hours of class daily in small groups, carefully integrated community activities, and another four hours daily of homework), students can learn as much as in a year-long program stateside. Yet because such programs are so intense, students may end up spending most of their time in the classroom or dorm room and have little opportunity to interact with and explore the local environment, unless family stays are part of the program. A summer may be even shorter than it appears, since one must subtract some time at the beginning of the program for students to settle in and at the end to prepare for departure.
- *Semester abroad*: a semester in a program that, ideally, includes language-oriented classes or tutoring for American learners, local university classes (to take or to audit), and field tasks or community projects that necessitate extensive contact with the local society.
- *Year abroad*: the ideal, a year-long program of study abroad, which offers the same opportunities as a semester abroad.
- *Direct enrollment*: direct application to foreign universities for enrollment (for a year, if this is possible, or even for a degree). Students are in a genuine local environment and away from other Americans. If, however, their linguistic and cultural skills are not strong, students may not be able to successfully negotiate life in another language and culture.

### Selecting a Locale

While London, Florence, or Tokyo may attract many students, one must carefully consider the best locale for the program. If language acquisition is the primary goal, smaller cities have fewer distractions and often cost substantially less than larger ones. Yet it is much easier to recruit for a program in Florence than for one in Perugia, for example. Private language schools flourish in many countries, and many are fine. Often the private schools respond much more quickly to program offers than public university institutes. In some countries, such as France, only the public schools may use the name “univer-

sity,” but the private schools without that designation may actually provide better-quality classes.

### Selecting the Faculty Leader

Leading a group abroad is a lot more work than teaching at home. Often the faculty leader may be expected to be head recruiter in selecting the students who go abroad. Dealing with a daily menu of locale-inflicted problems can be more demanding than, for instance, sponsoring a club or attending committee meetings. Students abroad sometimes encounter psychological or medical difficulties, and faculty members must be prepared to assist in getting the necessary help. The leader should also be someone with whom students will want to spend a month or a semester. And while leading classes overseas is replete with logistical challenges, it can be a source of satisfaction and delight as well.

### Program Review Guidelines

Different institutional settings have specific criteria for assessing study-abroad programs. Department chairs might consult with their deans to determine whether study abroad should be assessed departmentally, as part of general education, or in procedures shared by departments and offices of international education. It is important that evaluation of the programs be performed by foreign language faculty members, especially concerning language and culture classes. Staff members and administrators may volunteer to visit and evaluate programs, but they lack the linguistic and curricular expertise to be able to judge many aspects of study-abroad programs. It is particularly important for language department faculty members to assess programs in which most or all of the services are provided by outside vendors. One model for assessment is the IES MAP ([Model Assessment Practice](#)) for Study Abroad developed by the Institute for the International Education of Students.

For standards of good practice, organizational planning, curriculum integration, surveys, and other resources, consult the Web site of the [Forum on Education Abroad](#).

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### Note

1. See San Diego State University’s “A Guide to International Exchange Agreements” and its Office of Interna-

tional Programs' [home page](#), which links to the RFP for Faculty Travel Grants and to the College of Extended Studies Web site's Travel Study Faculty-Led Program Proposal form.

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## Works Cited

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