



International Experience as Career Exploration

How study abroad can improve your resume

You may have heard it before, from friends, parents, advisers, and career counselors: “Not only is study abroad a great way to travel and to experience another culture – it looks great on your resume!” Just what do they *mean* by that?

First, let’s look at some statistics. In the first large-scale survey of its kind, the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES) explored the long-term impact of study abroad on students’ personal, professional, and academic lives. They surveyed alumni from all IES study abroad programs from 1950-1999. Of the 3,400 respondents, a majority reported that their study abroad experience:

- Gave them increased self confidence (96-98%*)
- Had a lasting effect on their world view (95-97%*)
- Helped them better understand their own cultural values and biases (98%)
- Continues to influence interactions with people from different cultures (94%)

*results varied slightly depending on how long someone went abroad, i.e. one year vs one semester.

As you might expect, employers are seeking employees who are confident, mature, and adaptable, but in today’s global economy, it’s definitely a big plus if you have cross-cultural communication skills and international experience.

Next, let’s talk about skills. If you are majoring in something without an obvious vocational connection, you might be wondering what you have to offer to a prospective employer. The answer is: a lot more than you think! Through your undergraduate experience, you have gained many *transferable* skills that employers are looking for.

For many students, study abroad experiences are the ones that stand out, providing them with examples of the ways in which they have demonstrated these skills. Because of the challenges of living in a foreign country (e.g., different cultural norms, adapting to a new and unfamiliar environment, learning to speak and communicate in a foreign language, new academic expectations to meet, etc.) these study abroad alumni can be very competitive applicants for a number of different jobs, whether those jobs are internationally-focused or not.

Here are a few examples of the skills one might acquire on a study abroad program, taken from the Council for International Educational Exchange (CIEE) Alumni Resources webpage:

Time management skills
Communicate despite barriers
Learn quickly
Take initiative and take risks

Conduct research despite language and cultural differences
Adapt to new environments
Learn through listening and observing
Function with a high level of ambiguity

Now, you might be asking: How do I incorporate my study abroad experience into my resume?

One way is to include it in the Education section of your resume. Here is an example:

University of Washington, Bachelor of Arts in Art History, June 2010

Study Abroad, UW Exploration Seminar in Japan, August 30-Sept 18, 2009

- Learned to appreciate how and why Buddhist visual culture was critical to the life of Japanese people in times past, and how it continues to have a role in modern life
- Gained time management, interpersonal, and intercultural communication skills

For cover letter and interview examples, see reverse.

***International Experience as Career Exploration:
How study abroad can improve your resume (cont.)***

How do I include my study abroad experience in a cover letter?

Indiana University's Kelley School of Business advises the following:

“Be sure to briefly describe the skills and experiences learned from study abroad and how that learning is transferable to the position for which you are applying. You do not want to repeat your resume to the employer but this is the opportunity to highlight related accomplishments while overseas that will make the reader want to learn more.”

So, let's say that a student spent a semester in France studying at a French university. She is now applying for editorial internships, because she wants to find a job as a copy editor for a glossy magazine after she graduates. She might say this in her cover letter:

“During my semester in Montpellier, France, I studied translation for the first time. We translated literary texts and newspaper articles from French to English and from English to French. This not only greatly improved my French language skills, but also helped me to better understand the nuances of my native language. I learned how word choice, sentence structure, and grammar can influence meaning, which will help me with the detail-oriented job of copy editing.”

What about the interview?

Here is a mock scenario. It's just one example, but hopefully it sparks some ideas:

Interviewer: “In your cover letter, you describe yourself as adaptable. Can you give me an example?”

Interviewee: “At Oxford University, courses were taught very differently from the way they are at the UW. Rather than listening to lectures three times a week and taking notes, we met with individual tutors once a week to discuss our assignments. At first, this way of learning was very intimidating. I had to be prepared every week, completing all of the reading and jotting down discussion notes and questions in advance. I felt a lot of pressure to perform and unsure of what was expected of me. But, soon I came to enjoy the more active engagement with the readings that this approach required. I think I got a lot out of my studies and it has influenced the way that I approach my studies now that I'm back at the UW. I am more apt to approach professors during office hours and ask them questions about the material. I find that I prioritize my study time better, and I get more out of my classes than before I studied in England.”

Another scenario:

Interviewer: “You mentioned that you gained good communication and problem solving skills during your quarter in Ecuador. Tell me more about those skills.”

Interviewee: “I had taken a year of Spanish before going to Ecuador, and my Spanish teacher at the UW spoke Spanish to us in class, but once I arrived in Quito, it became clear to me that she was talking more slowly (even though it didn't seem that way at the time!) and without using any slang. In Quito, people spoke quickly and used a lot of slang. Also, I did not have the vocabulary to always say exactly what I meant. I had to be creative sometimes, using other words to describe the thing that I didn't know the word for. It was challenging, to have to spend so much time and effort to ask what felt like a simple question, but I got my point across, and it became easier and easier as my language skills improved. But they would not have improved if I hadn't made that effort.”

For additional information, please visit the following websites:

Transitions Abroad (See more details about the IES study mentioned on front page):

http://www.transitionsabroad.com/publications/magazine/0403/benefits_study_abroad.shtml

Simmons College, Marketing Your International Experience (several good links on this page):

http://libfs2.simmons.edu/crl/wiki/index.php/International_Study#Marketing_your_international_experience

School for International Training (SIT) Reentry Toolkit (see “Professional Development”) section:

http://www.worldlearning.org/OurWorld_documents/SITStudyAbroadReentryToolkit.pdf