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Study abroad: A world of opportunity. The educator's guide to study abroad opportunities

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Study abroad: A world of opportunity. The educator's guide to study abroad opportunities

Abstract

This project is designed for secondary educators to become familiar with international education and the many study abroad opportunities available to students today. I have put together a seminar for educators to explain and talk about these opportunities, and the vital role they play in helping students learn about these experiences. I have also put together a handbook for educators to refer to. This contains the same information we cover in the seminar.

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**STUDY ABROAD:
A WORLD OF OPPORTUNITY**



**THE EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO STUDY
ABROAD OPPORTUNITIES**

BY: BETH LOGSDON

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OVERVIEW

This project is designed for secondary educators to become familiar with international education and the many study abroad opportunities available to students today. I have put together a seminar for educators to explain and talk about these opportunities, and the vital role they play in helping students learn about these experiences. I have also put together a handbook for educators to refer to. This contains the same information we cover in the seminar.

RATIONALE

International exchange has become more common over the past decades. With an increase in the number of programs out there today, combined with the advancements made in international travel, it is now easier than ever to have a successful exchange experience. Research shows that the United States is host to a large number of foreign students each year, yet we send only a small percentage out to other countries. If more students were aware of the options available, I believe that we would have more young diplomats venturing out to learn, share, and represent our country in other lands.

In 1949, the United States made student exchange programs for secondary schools a part of their diplomatic efforts.¹ As the Second World War was ending, it became obvious to politicians that in order to help foster a cultural understanding among the various countries around the world, education was key. By allowing the youth of the world to participate in these programs, government officials were promoting a mutual understanding by providing the

¹ United States Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, "Secondary School Student Exchanges" April 2007: p2.

leaders of the future the opportunity to study in a foreign culture and live with a local family. Not only were these students transformed by these experiences, but so were their families, friends, and teachers, both in their host and home countries.² I believe that most of the problems we face with international relations are a result of misunderstanding and miscommunication. By allowing our youth, and future leaders to experience different cultures and ways of life, it will open their eyes to the many cultural differences around the world, and help them to understand that different does not necessarily mean bad or wrong.

In today's world, with headlines and stories of the continuing war in the Middle East, it is currently just as important as it was back in the 1940's for us to promote peace and understanding among these battling countries and cultural feuds. International education becomes even more vital in our global economy where we share markets and even security concerns.

"We are sharing more and more information, technology, goods, and even outerspace; we are facing the same challenges of climate change, environment destruction, nuclear risks, water and energy shortages, old and new disease pandemics and endemics. Thus the human dimension becomes essential for living together and finding appropriate and sustainable solutions...promoting better knowledge of each other would help avoid misunderstanding and aggressive attitudes."³

It is because of these many concerns that international education becomes that much more important. In order to succeed and thrive in a global economy

² "Secondary School Student Exchanges" p2.

³ Institute of International Education, "Expanding U.S. Study Abroad in the Arab World: Challenges and Opportunities" February 2009, issue 4, p7.

and interconnected world, our students need international knowledge, intercultural communication skills and a global perspective.⁴

In 2007 there were 108 non-government, government, and academic sponsors that were actively facilitating secondary school student exchanges.⁵ Twelve of these were schools or school districts, 19 Rotary International clubs, 76 private sector organizations, and the U.S. Department of State was also a sponsor, acting through grantee organizations. These programs range in size between two, and just over 3,000 students per year.⁶ Students looking to go abroad should investigate all of their options before choosing a program. Each is run a bit differently, and offers different perks and support for their students.

Of these four groups, schools and school districts send the smallest number of students each year. This kind of program participates in the J-1 Exchange Visitor Program, which works to expand the diversity of their student populations. These programs typically operate under the Memorandum of Understanding between U.S. schools and foreign schools. This is usually a reciprocal exchange. Even though there are not many schools that participate and sponsor J-1 students, and their student participation numbers are low, it has been established as a model that offers successful exchange experiences.⁷

The program that has been around the longest is Rotary International, which began its international exchange program in 1927. The Rotary based program is different from other exchange programs, in that individual Rotary clubs pay a portion of the expenses of the student visitors. They also place

⁴ “Expanding U.S. Study Abroad in the Arab World: Challenges and Opportunities” p9.

⁵ “Secondary School Student Exchanges” p4.

⁶ “Secondary School Student Exchanges” p4.

⁷ “Secondary School Student Exchanges” p6.

students with three different families throughout the academic year, and the local Rotary clubs that sponsor these students take an active role in ensuring that their participants enjoy a culturally rich and positive experience.⁸

The Department of State established several exchange programs that are sponsored by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. Each program was created following specific historical events that encouraged a diplomatic interest in recruiting participants from specific regions of the world. The main goal of these programs is to “promote mutual understanding, leadership development, a broadening educational experience, and exposure to democratic ideas.”⁹ The oldest of these programs, the Congress Bundestag Youth Exchange, was established in 1983. U.S. Congress and the German Bundestag both adopted specific legislation to further enhance the diplomatic engagement between their people. Funding for this reciprocal exchange in 2006 was \$3.26 million, and had at that point provided exchange opportunities for over 17,000 participants since its commencement.¹⁰ In 1992 the Future Leaders Exchange Program was established with the former Soviet Union. This program also had reached about 17,000 student participants by 2006, and had received over \$15 million for the funding that year. The Youth Exchange and Study Program was established in 2003 for students from countries with large Muslim populations. It sponsored nearly 2,000 student participants between 2003-2006, and budgeted \$19 million in 2006. The most recent addition to these programs is the American Serbia and Montenegro Youth Leadership Exchange, which

⁸ “Secondary School Student Exchanges” p6.

⁹ “Secondary School Student Exchanges” p6.

¹⁰ “Secondary School Student Exchanges” p6-7.

began in 2005. This program provides scholarships for students from Serbia and Montenegro, and had 110 participants the first year it began. Funding in 2006 was \$1.2 million.¹¹ The benefit of using these federally funded programs is that they are full scholarships, which eliminates the financial burden on the student and family.

The majority of secondary students studying abroad go with non-profit organizations. These organizations vary in size, but all must meet certain standards and are required to comply with established controlled requirements set to insure the number of successful experiences.¹² Although all sizes, from small, medium, and large organizations, have proven successful, the largest 20 sponsors are responsible for about 75% of all exchanges.¹³ Two of the largest and best known non-profit organizations include the American Field Service (AFS) and Youth for Understanding (YFU).

There are many benefits to studying abroad, including language, independence, maturity, perspective, cultural awareness/appreciation, personal growth, and experience. Research was completed in 2008 on AFS returnees to study the long term impact that a secondary school study abroad experience has had on their lives. The range of participants include AFS alumni, 20-25 years after their exchange experience, and compare them with their peers who did not participate in a secondary school exchange. The results of this study found definite differences between the two groups, some of which include the likelihood of language fluency in one or more languages other than their native

¹¹ "Secondary School Student Exchanges" p7.

¹² "Secondary School Student Exchanges" p8.

¹³ "Secondary School Student Exchanges" p9.

tongue, more likely to have friends from other cultures, to seek jobs that involve contact with other cultures, and more likely to encourage their children to meet people from other cultures and to study abroad.¹⁴

The studies found that language was one of the biggest assets obtained during a study abroad experience. “77% of all AFS alumni, and over 85% of all year program alumni, reported that they could speak at least one language in addition to their native language, and over 30% could speak at least two other languages.”¹⁵ The control group reported about 53% fluency in one other language and about 17% in at least two other languages. Obviously those students participating in the year long programs were more likely to consider themselves fluent, as they had more immersion time to practice and perfect their languages skills. This is one reason that the longer programs are encouraged. It takes time to really become a part of a community and learn the culture and language they have. I know from my own experience that the semester point is when I really started to understand everything and felt that I was part a of society in my host country. If I had left at this point, I would never have fully appreciated or understood what it was like to be a part of things there, as opposed to just viewing their world as an outsider or visitor.

Education is another area where they found a substantial difference between AFS returnees and their peers. “...returnees show a slightly higher level of educational achievement overall than the group of controls, and this

¹⁴ Bettina Hansel Ph.D with Zhishun Chen, “AFS Long Term Impact Study: Report 1” AFS International, April 2008, p11.

¹⁵ Bettina Hansel Ph.D. p4.

difference was found to be statistically significant.”¹⁶ The results show that over 90% of returnees are college graduates or higher, compared to about 81% of their peers. About 52% of returnees achieved an MA or higher, while 43% of the control group did. They also found that 34% of AFS returnees also studied abroad again in college, compared to 22% of the control group.¹⁷ This shows that returnees are more likely to continue going abroad later in life, to live, work, or study, than their peers who did not participate in a secondary education study abroad program. These are just a few of the findings in this study.

Research shows that the U.S. is host to significantly more foreign students each year than what we send abroad. In 2007, the U.S. was host to 20% of all international students worldwide, with the United Kingdom coming in second with 13%.¹⁸ In 2006, 56% of the secondary students studying here in the U.S. were from Europe, with about half of that number coming from Germany. Asia was second with 25%, however it is predicted that as Asian economies continue to expand there will also be an increase in the number of Asian students going abroad.¹⁹ During the 2008-09 school year, the Institute of International education found that the top places of origin for international college students here in the U.S. was primarily Asian. Four of the top five countries were Asian, comprising about 50% of all international students. These top five included India with 15.4%,

¹⁶ Bettina Hansel Ph.D. p3.

¹⁷ Bettina Hansel Ph.D. p3.

¹⁸ Rajika Bhandari, Ph.D. “Shifting Trends in Global Student Mobility: Who is Going Where?” Institute of International Education, NAFSA 2009, 26 May 2009.

¹⁹ “Secondary School Student Exchanges” p12.

China with 14.6%, South Korea with 11.2%, Canada with 4.4%, and Japan with 4.4%.²⁰

The overall trend for U.S. students going abroad, including the collegiate level, shows an 8.5% increase from the 2006-07 school year to the 07-08 school year, with 262,416 participants. "U.S. student participation in study abroad has more than tripled over the past two decades."²¹ This is an encouraging trend, as study abroad is becoming more of the norm rather than the exception. The top destinations for U.S. students continue to be in European, with 56.3% in 2007-08, however we are currently seeing an increase in non-traditional destinations. In 2007-08 the top 4 destinations were the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, and France.²² There were notable increases, by about 20%, in China, Austria, Ireland, and India, and by about 15% in Costa Rica, Japan, Argentina, and South Africa.²³ Between the 2002-03 and 03-04 school year the number of students that chose to study in India increased by 65%.²⁴ With the economic decline we've been experiencing it is predicted that we will continue to see an increase in more of these non-traditional destinations due to lower program costs.

There is also a disparity in the program length among various countries. Most organizations believe that the more time spent in a foreign country, the more of an understanding the student will get of the people, culture, and language. While the majority of the students the U.S. hosts comes for at least a

²⁰ Institute of International Education, "Open Doors 2009 Fast Facts"
http://opendoors.iienetwork.org/file_depot/0-10000000/0-10000/3390/folder/78747/Fast+Facts+2009.pdf
January 2010, p1.

²¹ "Open Doors 2009 Fast Facts" p2.

²² "Open Doors 2009 Fast Facts" p2.

²³ "Americans Study Abroad in Increasing Numbers" Press Release, Washington D.C. 16 November 2009.

²⁴ Girish Kaul, Jenika Kaul, and Jane Schukoske, "DESTINATION INDIA: Opportunities and Challenges for Expanding Study Abroad in a Non-Traditional Location" IIE Networker Magazine, Fall 2006.

year or longer, the majority of our students choose to participate in short-term programs. In 2007-08, 56.3% of our students participated in a short term program (summer, or eight weeks or less during academic term), while 39.5% participated in a mid-length program (one or two quarters, or one semester), and only 4.2% participated in a long-term program (academic or calendar year).²⁵ These numbers represent students at the college level, not secondary, however this trend shows a difference in the attitudes among various cultures. Our schools often make it more difficult to transfer credits from foreign universities, or students don't want to get behind in their programs of study, so they choose the shorter programs in length. Other cultures tend to put more importance on the study abroad experience, and seem to understand the value of what is obtained from living in a foreign country, even if that means making up that time upon return to their home country.

As our world continues to become more interconnected, the value of international experience will become an even greater advantage. When questioning many of my peers, I found that most of them were not aware of the study abroad opportunities available to them when they were in high school. I understand that this kind of experience is not for everyone, especially at a young age. I do, however, believe that everyone should be given the information so they can decide for themselves whether or not this is something they want to pursue. By educating our secondary educators on these opportunities, they will be able to easily pass this information on to their students.

²⁵ "Open Doors 2009 Fast Facts" p2.

EDUCATOR'S HANDBOOK

INTRODUCTION

Every year the United States is host to thousands of international exchange students that come here in search of education, experience, language, and understanding. Many students have grown accustomed to seeing foreign visitors attend their classes and participate in extracurricular activities. If we take a look at how many of our students go abroad though, there is a huge difference. We don't see the same desire to travel and live abroad as many of our international friends do. The big question that comes to mind, is why?

WHY ME?

As educators, we spend an enormous amount of our daily lives interacting with our students. We play the role of teacher, mentor, coach, counselor, and mediator. We encourage them when they are struggling, and praise them when they succeed. Whether we realize it or not, our students really look up to us and rely on us for the support and guidance they need. This is true not only in math or science class, but in life as well. I believe that the disproportionate number of kids that choose to study abroad compared those coming to the U.S. each year, is because most of our students are simply not aware of the opportunities out there. This is where we come in!

Even though most students don't begin study abroad programs until high school, the seed can be planted in middle school. Once their interest is peaked, students will take the idea and run with it! They will begin their own research and

start asking around for more information. While not all students will want to participate in this experience, it can change the lives of those who do.

WHO GOES?

Studying abroad is definitely not for everyone. There are different programs that offer various length options for students. Regardless of the length, students must possess a few traits in order to be successful.

The most important characteristic an exchange student must have is *flexibility*. Living in an unfamiliar environment and culture is exciting, but you must be flexible and willing to try everything at least once. Anyone going abroad must also be *open-minded* and *accepting* of other cultures and people. Too many Americans travel abroad and offend people because of their manner and how they come across when talking to others. Some of it is cultural, but as a guest in another country you must be open to everyone and everything.

Another important item when looking for potential exchange students is *independence*. While we're not looking for students who are ready to wake up and be an adult tomorrow morning, we are looking for students that will be able to take care of themselves. Even though the students are placed with a host family, they will still have to make decisions on their own. This is a great learning experience, but not everyone is ready to handle things on their own.

While students do not need to have perfect grades, it is important that they work in school and attain *decent grades*. Most exchange organizations have minimum academic requirements. This is to ensure students will be able to make the transition to a new school and still succeed. School is challenging to

the average teenager, so attempting it in a different language and culture is even more so.

Transitioning into a new culture also requires *social skills*. This does not mean you have to be popular or super chatty, but you must be able to meet new people and make new friends. The class loner would not do well with this kind of experience. Students must also have *confidence*. This means confidence not only in themselves, but also how they interact with others. This is definitely a trait that will grow and develop much more throughout the exchange experience.

And last but not least, an *adventurous spirit!* This also goes along with being willing to try and do everything at least once. Overall, students that are involved in clubs and organizations will adapt well during a study abroad experience. While not everyone is going to take advantage of opportunities like this, if they aren't aware of the opportunities to begin with then they will never go!

BENEFITS!

The experience of living abroad generates a lot of *personal growth* and *knowledge* for the students. The student that left in the fall is definitely not the same student that returns months later. These changes that take place have life long effects both personally and professionally. They grow and develop more in the semester or year abroad than they would learn in multiple years at home.

One area that many students grow a lot in is *confidence*. Even though that is a trait we look for when encouraging students to go abroad, there is

always an improvement upon their return. *Maturity* goes along with this, as well as *independence*.

The biggest area of change seen through this experience, is *perspective*. Until a person lives and totally immerses themselves into a culture they will never understand that difference in perspective. It is something not gained by those who simply visit as a tourist. One must actually live the culture and speak the language to fully appreciate it. A new *understanding* and *appreciation* are also qualities gained. Not just of their culture, but of ours as well. It's amazing the things we take for granted living here in the United States.

Because these students may become the future leaders of our country, it's great experience for them to get a different look into world politics. It also prepares them for a *leadership* role in life, if they so choose. One of the best characteristics of a great leader is being able to understand people: their traditions, priorities, goals, and motivations. This is helpful for any job anywhere in the world.

Language is a valuable skill for everyone in today's world as well. It gives us an interesting insight into how other cultures think and process information. It can also make you an asset to a team or company if you are fluent in multiple languages. While we can all sit in classes and try to learn a new language, the only true way to fully learn and understand it is to be completely immersed in it. While this can be frustrating initially, it's amazing how much we pick up in such a short period of time.

Studying abroad also allows students to meet many people from many countries, and build *friendships* that will last a lifetime. It's an amazing feeling to

become a part of a family in a foreign country; a family that you may continue to talk to and visit throughout the rest of your life. These bonds we create are incredible, and you never know where they may lead you later in life.

ORGANIZATIONS

As the world becomes a smaller place, more and more intercultural organizations are starting up. There are two, however, that have been around the longest and have established the largest network worldwide. These are AFS (American Field Service), and YFU (Youth for Understanding).

The American Field Service began 95 years ago as a volunteer ambulance corps. After WWII these volunteer ambulance drivers wanted to continue their intercultural service by creating a cultural understanding between the nations of the world. They decided to build a cross-cultural educational exchange program for high school students. AFS currently has programs and volunteers stationed in over 50 countries around the world.²⁶

Youth for Understanding is an organization that began 58 years ago. They strive to empower their students and give them the knowledge they need to succeed in the world we live in today. They send about 4,000 students each year to 40 countries worldwide.²⁷

Both of these organizations are non-profit and rely heavily on volunteers for everything to run efficiently. They believe in hand on learning experiences, and have great support staff and systems in place to provide a safe experience

²⁶ AFS Intercultural Programs, web. <<http://www.afs.org>>. 10 October 2009.

²⁷ Youth For Understanding, web. <<http://www.yfu.org>>. 10 October 2009.

for all students. This is one benefit to using well established organizations such as these.

HOSTING

Every summer there is an inevitable push among study abroad programs to scramble and find host families for all of their incoming exchange students. For students who have an interest in culture and are thinking about possibly studying abroad someday this is a great opportunity to see what international education is about. Hosting is also a great way for the whole family to participate in the intercultural exchange experience.

There are many benefits to hosting an exchange student. With today's globalization and ever shrinking economy, we need to open our minds and hearts to different cultures and perspectives. Living with an international student allows us to share our culture while learning about their culture and traditions. This exchange fosters understanding and allows us to explore a different perspective on life. Many exchange students may use what they've learned through this experience and go on to become future leaders in their country. This experience allows first hand learning that cannot be taught in a classroom.

GETTING STARTED!

Once interested students have even the slightest bit of information about study abroad opportunities, then they can go research it on their own. Because much of this information is not common knowledge, it is key for us as educators to plant that small seed. Even though not everyone will bite, there are definitely some who will. The internet allows us to find information on just about anything

these days. Students will be able to look up information on different exchange organizations as well as different countries they may be interested in.

Many high schools around the United States are hosts to visiting exchange students each year. This is also a great resource for interested students. Talking with a current exchange student allows them to ask questions and find answers that often only those of us who have experienced living in a foreign culture can answer.

The greatest concern for students and parents for a program like this is cost. There are many scholarship opportunities out there for interested students, but the key is to apply early. Most scholarship applications must be finished in December the year before they are planning to go abroad. Another great way to fund this awesome experience is to do fundraising. With enough notice, most communities are very supportive for events such as spaghetti dinners and garage sales. While this does require a bit of work, I believe it makes the experience worth that much more to the students who put the hard work in.

YOUR TURN!

Now it's up to you to decide. Are these programs and opportunities worth the time and effort spent to talk with your students? I believe it is. This can be a life changing experience for anyone, and it takes all of us giving the students their options. Planting this seed in middle school is ideal, however it's never too late to talk to high school students about this as well. It's sad that many students don't go abroad because they simply aren't aware of what's out there for them.

