

Education

HIGHER EDUCATION

From Albania to Singapore, U.S. Students Look for Tailored Experiences Abroad

By LAURA PAPPANO

When you are in a foreign country, don't speak the language and have something you must accomplish, stuff can go wrong.

Which, at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, is the point. "They are all in over their heads," Stephen McCauley, co-director of the school's Global Lab, said of student teams dispatched to 53 locations in 35 countries to tackle problems in local communities.

It is hardly "Survivor: College Edition." But, increasingly, study abroad is a boots-on-the-ground experience with challenge and purpose.

Take the W.P.I. students who arrived in Albania's flood-prone Shkoder region with the task of getting residents in rural and Roma communities to think concretely about disaster planning. Immediately, students saw that their approach — having residents photograph water damage in their homes for follow-up interviews — was a bust.

"It was too complex," said Sarah St. Pierre, a biomedical engineering major who with three classmates and two faculty members traveled to the region in October 2017 for seven weeks. "We had to take a step back. What is actually going to work? What can we actually do?"

Their solution: visit residents to see the moldy doors and water-stained walls from the epic 2010 flood. Then, structure talks about emergency moves, like storing drinking water and untying livestock, using a sorting game adapted from one by the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre. Their version used information gathered from interviews and field work and was crafted from paper and packing tape.

This is not your parent's study abroad.

Sure, you could lose hours to tiny cups of espresso on sloped tables on the periphery of cobblestoned plazas, meet every Monday at El Prado, or marvel at the hopes held by the Omikuji, tiny paper fortunes at Shinto shrines.

But you may not have time. Study abroad now — like nearly everything else — is more structured, brief and undertaken with a goal in mind. It has become a must-get college



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W.P.I. students Donald Dione, Sarah St. Pierre, Tyler Weiss and Kylie Dickinson on campus in Worcester, Mass. The students traveled to a flood-prone area of the Shkoder region in Albania, where they adapted an interactive card game created by the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre to help local residents better manage flood risks.

experience, a coveted résumé credential and a way to test independence for a generation that does so carefully.

Those lures are drawing more United States students than ever to study overseas — more than 332,000 in 2016-17, according to the 2018 Open Doors Report on International Exchange. But for shorter periods. Sixty-five percent go for eight weeks or less or over the summer (it was 56 percent a decade earlier).

Most want academic credit, but any foreign experience counts. Those doing non-credit internships and service learning (it could be just a few weeks), have nearly tripled in the past five years. It helps that the grand umbrella of "study abroad" now includes a variety of foreign experiences so that, like the way we consume music, students can choose what they want, need and can afford.

What's clear is that study abroad — once

the way to get fluent in a foreign language or firsthand exposure to cultural sites — is less and less about that. In fact, said Cheryl Matherly, vice president and vice provost for international affairs at Lehigh University, "if you had programs just based on students with language ability, you wouldn't have anybody going."

Enrollment in foreign language study, she said, "is cratering."

Increasingly, study abroad happens in English. And schools like Lehigh are making targeted foreign forays — cast as global learning — a centerpiece of campus offerings. They appeal to students across majors with tailored experiences like marketing in Shanghai or combining tech and business in Prague, which slip into convenient time slots, like summer.

In the past two years, Lehigh has expanded abroad offerings, adding internships, including ones with tech start-ups in New

Delhi. This summer, the new 32 Global Social Impact Fellowships will offer project learning at eight sites, with six in Sierra Leone. The message: It's for everyone.

"We really think the international experience is part of the Lehigh experience," Dr. Matherly said. Campus courses are also being redesigned with a global focus so going abroad doesn't feel "like an add-on."

Abroad options are growing elsewhere, too. The University of Oregon has over 300, up from 200 five years ago, with brief faculty-led programs and internships the most popular, said Tom Bogenschield, executive director of global education.

At W.P.I., which first sent students abroad in 1988 to London, those going outside the United States to complete required projects has risen dramatically in the past five years, to over 1,000 this year from an undergraduate student body of about 4,400. Among the Class of 2019, 60 percent went abroad.

What's happening is that students are trying to do a lot at once — stay on track to graduate, not miss what's happening on campus and collect new life experiences, said Melissa Torres, president and chief executive of the Forum on Education Abroad, whose 800 members are campuses and program providers. It's put study abroad on a tight schedule. "It goes back to the way they were raised," Ms. Torres said, "with less and less time for free play."

This is why Megan Carroll, a rising senior from Brooklyn majoring in psychology at Lehigh, chose this summer to be a media and communications intern at 3M in Singapore. She didn't want to be away from friends and family "for a whole semester."

While Ms. Carroll said she and friends "talk about global politics," she admitted "we don't know everything." She was itching to get out and see the world for herself.

"People my age are seeing the importance of stepping outside of themselves and seeing other cultures and experiencing things not just on TV, but themselves," she said. Being outside the United States for a short span gives her practice being on her own and the space to mull career plans, "challenging myself to see what I do and don't enjoy."

And — the best part — Lehigh organized it. Ms. Carroll said the university set up her housing and internship, provided a stipend for meals and travel (plus \$800 to make up for missed summer earnings). All that, she said, "makes it significantly easier to do this."

Unlike a few years ago when schools barely tolerated study abroad (students battled to get financial aid and credits to transfer),

more now encourage it. Many even help students apply for passports, pick programs and figure out funding.

And you don't have to go for months. "The big message is that any length of time has value," said Donald L. Rubin, professor emeritus at the University of Georgia and a leader of a large multiyear study on travel abroad. "Three weeks can make a big difference if they are three weeks that are well executed."

Perhaps the biggest finding: Low-income students and those entering college with lower SAT scores had the greatest gains. Study abroad, said Dr. Rubin, "may actually be a way of leveling the playing field."

The study has fed the drive to get more students to have an international experience. The pitch starts early, said Ms. Torres, with more schools "talking with families about education abroad as part of freshman orientation."

Laurie Leshin, the president of W.P.I., has put it in her welcome address. And in fall 2017 Lehigh began recruiting incoming first-generation students to go abroad (and hosted a "practice" trip to Montreal at spring break).

That is the only way Jenny Lin, from Nesquehoning, Pa., even considered going. Otherwise, she would never have even attended an information session.

"I'm just not going to go and listen to them tell me about how expensive it is to study abroad," she said. After considering options with advisers, she spent six weeks in Shanghai last summer taking classes in Chinese and working as a marketing intern.

Ms. Lin appreciated the self-reflection required — feeling "weird" about whether she saw herself as Chinese or American — and the challenge of making a slide presentation on a tight deadline for visiting dignitaries.

Going can come with complications. "You have countries where it is illegal to be gay," said Andrew Gordon, chief executive and founder of Diversity Abroad, which works on issues of representation and inclusion. He added that "people with darker skin also have a different experience." In some places, women of color "are mistaken as prostitutes."

The very value of going abroad — being uncomfortable, trying to operate in unfamiliar surroundings — is also what makes it hard. As campuses try to have more focused and immersive programming (not just ridiculously easy classes in foreign cities), there is a lot to consider, including the impact of the visit on the host community.

It includes helping students to understand "how you act, how you show up" in another

culture, said Leslie Dodson, co-director of W.P.I.'s Global Lab. As when female students went to Morocco and struggled with expectations around dress.

Even though they had discussed it in advance, Dr. McCauley said, "we had to keep working with them while they were there." Dr. Dodson said, "At the end of the day, we are guests, we are not there to promote our agendas."

W.P.I.'s approach relies on sponsoring organizations to frame problems; students work on solutions. Not all are clearly stated. Some planning done stateside misses the mark.

But it is precisely this imprecision and the translation required — not of language but of grasping the issue — that makes the experience valuable, said Dr. Leshin. "This is about solving an open-ended problem in an entirely different culture, in an entirely different location without friends and family."

For a generation accustomed to support and structure, it's unsettling. Even though he is weeks from boarding a plane, Cameron Person, a computer science major from Los Angeles and a rising junior, said he already has some "personal gripes."

Along with three other W.P.I. students and advisers, Mr. Person will arrive in Kyoto on Aug. 19. The plan: help a virtual reality studio get support to digitally preserve cultural heritage sites and practices. They planned to do focus groups and surveys "to get an idea how cultural stakeholders might view technology" of historic sites. He's excited — he's never been outside the country and just got a passport — but he is also annoyed.

He's studied Japanese, entranced by the language after falling for anime and manga in high school, but he is not fluent. That makes him anxious about how they will get information. As "someone who likes structure," Mr. Person wants a clear task and "all the tools to get that thing done." Which is exactly what is not going to happen.

And yet improvisation — having to operate in a strange culture and make changes on the fly — is what provides the career boost that everyone talks about. The Albania team gathered recently in a glass-walled conference room with the project's work product displayed on the table, just weeks ahead of graduation.

The experience, they said, figured prominently in their job searches. "Companies want to know how you perform under pressure," said Kylie Dickinson, who majored in bioinformatics and computational biology. Donald Dione, who plans to work in biotech, said he has "been asked about the project in pretty much every one of my interviews."