



study abroad a lifetime of benefits

by amy ruhter mcmillan and gayly open

In the summer of 2002, The Institute for the International Education of Students (IES) conducted the largest known survey of study abroad alumni. Of the 14,800 surveys received by alumni, more than 3,400 were returned—a strong response rate of 23 percent. Alumni from all IES programs (years 1950-1999) responded to questions about their academic, personal, intercultural and professional development as a result of studying abroad. Until now, very few research efforts have been made in the field of international education to determine quantitatively the long-term impact of study abroad on its participants. The following offers firsthand, statistical information, illustrating the profound and long-lasting difference that study abroad makes in the lives of its participants.

JOHN IRVING, AUTHOR OF BOOKS SUCH as *The Cider House Rules* and *The World According to Garp*, once wrote, "My year [of study abroad] was the single-most important year of my education, or perhaps more broadly, my growing up....I became so excited by the city and its history and, outside of [our professor's] philosophy courses, was so encouraged by him to explore Vienna more....I know I feel permanently attached to the city, and in the time in my life, that I feel I first became vividly aware of other people's lives all around me."

Irving's experience studying abroad (IES Vienna 1963-64) made an indelible impact on his future endeavors. You too can reap the benefits of study abroad (and maybe even one day find your own fame). The IES study found that no

matter where you study abroad or for how long, the impact of that experience will likely affect the rest of your life. For the majority of alumni respondents, stepping outside of their own cultures to live and study in a foreign country influenced their careers and educational choices, launched lifelong pursuits, increased cultural tolerance and understanding and facilitated lasting friendships.

IGNITE YOUR EDUCATION

After studying abroad, most students never view their education in the same way again. A powerful experience, it often influences subsequent educational endeavors, including the decision to pursue higher degrees. More than 52 percent of respondents indicated that they had achieved a post-graduate degree,

compared to the 9 percent of U.S. Americans obtaining graduate degrees as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau*. More than 80 percent of respondents agreed that studying abroad had enhanced their interest in academic study.

Study abroad students return home with a greater vigor for academic pursuits and a renewed interest in lifelong learning. Nearly 63 percent of students said that the experience had influenced their decisions to expand or change their academic majors. In fact, nearly 90 percent of students indicated that their experiences abroad had influenced all their subsequent educational experiences. Julia Reinhard Lupton (IES Freiburg 1983) attributes her current position as associate professor of English and comparative literature at the University of California-

(tips for the road)

Irvine to her experience abroad. "The language, research and living skills I learned [in Germany] continue to sustain me now in my career as a professor. I always encourage my undergraduate students to consider including study abroad in their academic plans, since I know what a difference it has made in my own life."

For those students who studied abroad to improve or develop foreign language skills, experiencing a language firsthand—in the streets of a foreign city, in a local university course or while living with local roommates—made an indelible impact on their foreign language skills. Nearly 35 percent of the students who studied a foreign language abroad still use a language other than English on a regular basis (twice a month). Spanish was cited as the most commonly used language, followed by French and German.

LAUNCH YOUR CAREER

Listing a study abroad experience on your resume can also enhance your chances for job success. Having taken this initiative not only says something about your academic achievements, but also about your personal ambition and determination. More and more employers are seeking out culturally aware and experienced employees who can work effectively in an increasingly global workplace. Our statistics show that the influence of study abroad on future career goals and choices is profound, especially for those students who participated in an internship while abroad. Kathleen Turaski (IES London 1992), a University of Georgia graduate, wrote that her internship at The National Portrait Gallery in London was "the impetus to return [to London] in 1995 to attend St. Martin for a master's in communication design. The international experiences have been a driving force in my design and career."

Internships are an unrivaled way to experience local culture in the workplace and to improve foreign language skills, as well as to diversify your work experience. Of the 596 students who responded that they had interned while abroad, 70 percent

agreed that the experience had sparked an interest in a career direction they ended up pursuing after their experiences abroad. It is becoming increasingly popular to intern while abroad. Eight out of ten students who had interned abroad said that they had acquired skill sets that influenced their future career paths, such as working for a multi-national organization, getting a job overseas or volunteering internationally.

"My semester [abroad] launched me into a personal and professional involvement with Spain that has already lasted 25 years. A political science lecture in Madrid about U.S. and Spanish involvement in an obscure war in Sahara...led to a graduate fellowship in Spain and North Africa, which led to work as a foreign correspondent based in Spain," wrote Gary Abramson (IES Madrid 1978).

PERSONAL GROWTH & DEVELOPMENT

Beyond affecting career or educational direction, one of the most significant and intangible impacts of studying abroad is participants' increased understanding of their own cultural values and biases. Eighty-two percent of alumni said that they had developed a more sophisticated way of looking at the world as a result of studying abroad. These same individuals were more likely to seek out a greater diversity of friends, and long after their study abroad experiences have ended, they are still finding that it affects their life choices and values.

Additionally, students who study abroad acquire a unique set of skills that distinguish them as future world leaders—leaders who have the understanding and skills to navigate effectively, humanely and positively across different cultures.

Although change and living in a foreign culture can be overwhelming at times, it can also put into motion significant personal growth. More than 96 percent of students surveyed indicated that they believe study abroad increased their self-confidence. Over 97 percent said the experience enabled them to learn something new about themselves

and served as a catalyst for increased maturity. Jason Thornberg (IES Vienna 1994) wrote that although it has been nearly ten years since he was a student in Vienna, there isn't a single day that goes by when he does not feel the impact of his experience abroad. "The time [in Vienna] fundamentally changed how I view the world. It has allowed me the ability to view the world and its issues from several perspectives. Secondly, the friendships I made in Vienna, with both Americans and Viennese, remain some of my most cherished relationships."

MAKE LIFE-LONG FRIENDS

Beyond opportunities for personal growth, current students consistently say that one of the most important and influential reasons they chose to study abroad was to make new friends, both international and from the U.S. No matter how much time has passed, many of the friendships alumni formed abroad still remain strong. More than 52 percent still keep in touch with friends they made while abroad. "I continue to remain in contact with four other friends from when I studied abroad," remarked Gail McKee (IES Vienna 1965-66), "even though we all live in different states, and it has been more than 30 years since I have seen two of them." The shared experience of living and learning abroad often creates a lifelong bond of friendship—in fact, 63 percent of students who studied abroad in the 1950s and 1960s are still in contact with friends they made overseas. Four percent of all respondents even married someone they met while abroad.

Participants also found that their host countries made a powerful enough impression on them that nearly 60 percent of those surveyed have returned to the country where they studied, many visiting not only friends but the host families they lived with while abroad. "My housing circumstance was the best part of my experience," wrote Ivy Howell (IES Salamanca 2002). "It made lasting ties to Salamanca that were hard to leave. I will say that my host family truly made my experience memorable."

HOW WILL YOU CHANGE THE WORLD?

The impact and influence of a study abroad experience is clearly dynamic and far-reaching. What is hard to quantify, however, is not how study abroad changes an individual, but how the world benefits from those who study abroad. Alumni responses to the survey indicated that they are involved in a myriad of different vocations and activities that in many ways directly relate to their study abroad experiences—alumni are making a difference teaching English in China, working for an environmental agency on the island of Kyushu, returning to their study abroad locations each year with a group of high school students and completing a master's degree at the University of Bath. Hundreds of others, because of study abroad, live their lives beyond their borders. Few other experiences in life have proven to have such a profound effect on academic, professional and personal development as study abroad.

As Dr. Clark Hendley (IES Vienna 1963) so eloquently remarked, "The 18th century English gentleman culminated his education with the 'grand tour', a year-long ramble through Europe. My own year in Vienna, however, served not as the climax of my education, but the beginning." **AV**

IES is a 53-year-old, not-for-profit, academic study abroad program provider with a consortium of over 150 prestigious U.S. colleges and universities. Currently, IES offers 25 study abroad programs in 14 countries for over 3,500 U.S. undergraduates each year. AMY RUHTER MCMILLAN is the publications editor at IES, and GAYLY OPEM is the executive vice president of marketing, recruitment and enrollment. Contact them at aruhter@IESabroad.org or visit www.IESabroad.org.

**Taken from U.S. Census Bureau, Educational Attainment in the United States: March 2002, detailed tables (PPL-169).*

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