



AMERICAN INSTITUTE  
FOR FOREIGN STUDY

AIFS STUDENT GUIDE TO

# Study Abroad & Career Development

By: Martin Tillman



# **AIFS Student Guide To Study Abroad & Career Development**

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The goal of this Guide is to provide students with a framework to understand the impact and added value of study abroad for their career development. Regardless of duration or destination, we believe students will benefit from considering the career implications of their decision to study abroad.

## **Upon Return to Campus: How to Effectively Market Your Study Abroad Experience to Employers**

The majority of students study abroad during their sophomore or junior years. This means that you will have at least one, and perhaps two, years to “unpack” your study abroad experience upon returning to campus. This is enough time to clarify how your international experience could influence your career goals and impact your job search strategy.

It is up to you to make the case and demonstrate the link between your study abroad experience and the specific skills valued by the company or organization you want to work for.

### **The following are suggested steps you can take upon return to campus:**

- Visit a career services advisor to revise and edit your resumé to incorporate the new interpersonal skills and intercultural competencies that you strengthened while abroad.

- Discuss ways to strengthen your cover letter to articulate how your study abroad experience is an asset for an employer.
- Participate in campus or community programs that provide opportunities to practice articulating what you learned and the steps you took to gain or strengthen intercultural and professional skills.
- Discuss your international experience with international students from the country in which you studied to gain a fresh perspective on the culture and values of that society.

As you prepare to conduct your job search, re-write your resumé, develop a cover letter, and prepare for interviews, keep in mind the qualities and skills that employers expect of a candidate who had studied abroad. These would include:

- Strong problem solving skills and keen analytic ability
- Tolerance for ambiguity and ability to adapt in new environments
- Interpersonal communications skills
- Cross-cultural competencies (could include language skills and ability to work well in different cultural settings)
- Personal traits such as character, self-reliance, and dependability

## **Strengthening Your Career Toolkit: Articulating Newly Acquired Skills & Competencies**

### **Crafting an Effective Resumé**

#### **What is a resumé?**

- It's a marketing tool and often the first way that you "introduce" yourself to an employer or someone whom you're asking for an informational interview.
- It's an organic or dynamic document that will change and evolve over the course of your career. It's important to remember that it needs to change as you gain new skills and experience – or as you change the course of your career after graduation.

Before writing your resumé, you need to reflect upon the international skills and competencies you have gained from your study abroad experience. As we

suggested earlier, the time to consider how your experience “fits” into your resumé is before you leave campus. Whether or not you visit a career counselor before departure, you do want to make an appointment to see an advisor upon your return.

While there are generally accepted formats for a resumé, it’s best to discuss your document with a career services counselor or advisor who understands your specific academic program and career interests or preferences.

Audit your time abroad to highlight professional experiences and new intercultural competencies, and be prepared to describe them – using specific language – in your resume. You will need to develop a number of unique and individualized bullet points that show specific ways in which you gained skills and competencies during your study abroad experience.

An employer will not automatically “see” what may be very obvious to you about a skill or an experience you had while studying abroad!

*It’s up to you to showcase and articulate the value of critical incidents, classroom work, community engagement, or international travel – and to be able to discuss why any or all of these activities make you a strong candidate for a particular job assignment in an organization or company.*

### Tips:

- Keep it simple.
- Make no mistakes in spelling or documentation of dates, places, or roles.
- Write specific as opposed to overly general bullet statements – no longer than two sentences as illustrated below.
- Make it no longer than one page in length at this stage of your life.
- Use this example for placing your study abroad program on your resumé:

#### Education

Quinnipiac University  
B.A., Political Science

Hamden, CT  
Expected May 2012

University of Botswana (AIFS Program)  
Coursework in African studies and economics  
If you wrote a research paper, cite the title here

Gaborone, Botswana  
Sept–Dec 2011

- Other types of headers that will showcase your overseas experience and related accomplishments on your home campus include, for example:
- Cross-Cultural Campus Involvement
- Foreign Languages
- Countries Visited
- Volunteer Service

Here are examples of the type of thought-provoking phrases you might use to craft bullet statements about different international experiences on your resumé:

### **Strengthened Cross-Cultural Skills:**

- Adapted to cultural differences and customs through daily interaction with my host family over a period of 4 months
- Overcame societal differences and fostered cultural understanding through a short-term work experience at a local business
- Gained a greater appreciation for diversity and cultural differences through voluntary service experience at a local school

### **Developed Language Competency/Communication Skills**

- Passed proficiency examination in [name of language] or obtained certificate for intensive language study at [name of college or institute]
- Cultivated language and communication skills through sustained dialogue with my host family and others whom I met in my host community
- Learned to use nonverbal and verbal communication to overcome language barriers

### **Flexibility/Risk-Taking**

- Learned how to adapt to unanticipated situations and improvise new plans due to periodic travel mishaps and unexpected events
- Modified my way of life to maximize exposure and opportunities for learning in my local community

\*Adapted from the Career Development Center, SUNY-Binghamton

## Presenting Skills & Competencies in a Cover Letter

A cover letter complements the experiences outlined on your resume. It should not replicate the same information in a prose style format. It should highlight the attributes that set you apart from other candidates! One such attribute is your international experience while you studied abroad.

The cover letter should demonstrate to an employer – in as explicit language as possible – why you possess the skills and experiences that are a match for the requirements of the job.

### Tips:

- Keep it to one page
- Write it in a formal business style
- Even if it's not evident that the job requires international experience, you can highlight appropriate transferable skills gained through your time abroad (*e.g., independence, tolerance, self-confidence, problem-solving skills, ability to adapt in different environments and to work in harmony with people of differing values and backgrounds*)
- If the job is with an international NGO or a multinational company doing business in the part of the world where you studied, then the direct value of all your international and intercultural skills is more obvious – but you still need to be specific in describing how your studies, skills, and competencies will be of value in your performance on the job

## Articulating Skills & Competencies in an Interview

A good interview is about telling a good story. It's about weaving a narrative in response to questions about your ability to do a job, carry out your duties, and adapt to the organization and its expectations of staff.

When speaking to employers, address the value of both the general and the specific skills you developed while studying abroad. *It's important not to assume that the interviewer will realize how your international experience is relevant to your candidacy.*

Examples might include: You are adept at managing change; you are independent and have self-discipline while being sensitive to the needs of others. Dozens of work-related characteristics are developed abroad, which you can discuss in your interview: resourcefulness, versatility, persistence, an observant and calm demeanor, diligence, multifaceted skills in communications, broad and

strategic thinking, an ability to deal with ambiguities, courage, an ability to take on challenging work, open-mindedness, flexibility, resourcefulness, tact, listening and observing skills, an ability to deal with stress, sense of humor, awareness of interpersonal politics, respect for protocol and hierarchy, loyalty, and tenacity.

An interviewer may provide you with an opportunity to tell a story based upon your international experience and your answers to any question should not be too lengthy. Questions may be posed like these:

- What did you learn about yourself as a result of your study abroad experience?
- Why did you choose to study in [name of country]? Why was it important to you?
- How did you get engaged in the local culture outside the classroom?
- Can you describe a time when you had to change your behavior to accommodate or adjust to different local conditions?

### Tips:

- Practice – practice – practice
- Work with your career services office to arrange a mock interview with an alumnus ideally someone who studied abroad!
- Craft examples to share in the interview that illustrate how you gained a specific interpersonal or intercultural skill during your study abroad experience

### Resources

“Building Connections: Your Study Abroad Experience & Your Career.” *SUNY-Binghamton*.

[www2.binghamton.edu/career-development-center/students/undergraduate/international-opportunities/pdf/Building%20Connections\\_Study%20Abroad%20and%20Your%20Career.pdf](http://www2.binghamton.edu/career-development-center/students/undergraduate/international-opportunities/pdf/Building%20Connections_Study%20Abroad%20and%20Your%20Career.pdf)

“International Opportunities, Industry-Specific Information.” *Duke University Career Center*. Excellent reference tool showing how to interpret skills and competencies in relation to the needs of employers in different fields. Terrific links to organizations.

[www.studentaffairs.duke.edu/career/resources/international-ops](http://www.studentaffairs.duke.edu/career/resources/international-ops)

“Resume Tips for Your International Experience.” *University of Minnesota Learning Abroad Center*.

[www.umabroad.umn.edu/assets/files/PDFs/students/returnedStudents/resumeTips.pdf](http://www.umabroad.umn.edu/assets/files/PDFs/students/returnedStudents/resumeTips.pdf)

Citron, James L., and Vija G. Mendelson. "Coming Home: Relationships, Roots and Unpacking." *Abroad View*. Essay on the challenges and opportunities of re-adjusting upon returning to campus.

[www.abroadview.org/return/citron\\_mendelson.htm](http://www.abroadview.org/return/citron_mendelson.htm)

Cuene, Kelly. "Help Employers See the Value of Your Study Abroad Experience." *Student Branding Blog*. 28 Oct. 2009.

[www.studentbranding.com/help-employers-see-the-value-of-your-study-abroad-experience/](http://www.studentbranding.com/help-employers-see-the-value-of-your-study-abroad-experience/)

Curran, Sheila. "The Other Side of Education Abroad: Same City, Different Results." *International Educator* 16.6 (2007). NAFSA: Association of International Educators. An essay depicting different outcomes in a job interview that were a result of two different approaches to the same study abroad experience.

[www.nafsa.org/publication.sec/periodicals/international\\_educator\\_1/ie\\_nov\\_dec\\_2007/web\\_extra\\_other\\_side/](http://www.nafsa.org/publication.sec/periodicals/international_educator_1/ie_nov_dec_2007/web_extra_other_side/)

Gardner, Phil, Linda Gross, and Inge Steglitz. "Unpacking Your Study Abroad Experience: Critical Reflection for Workplace Competencies." *Collegiate Employment Research Institute, Michigan State University, CERI Research Brief 1-2008*. Excellent model of a seminar for returning students to assist them to make sense of their experience abroad, and to understand how to articulate skills learned.

[www.studyabroad.isp.msu.edu/people/unpacking\\_brief.pdf](http://www.studyabroad.isp.msu.edu/people/unpacking_brief.pdf)

Matherly, Cheryl, and William Nolting. "Career Benefits: Understanding & Articulating the Skills you Gained Abroad." *Abroad View* 10:1 (2007).

Mueller, Sherry, and Mark Overmann. *Working World: Careers in International Education, Exchange and Development*. Georgetown University Press, 2008. The best volume outlining development of career pathways in these fields. Excellent advice and terrific professional profiles of leaders in each field who respond candidly to questions about their success and the influences in their lives.

Paul, Nancy. "Global Competency Quick Reference Guide." *Career Development Center at Binghamton University, State University of New York*. Excellent reference tool to assist students to understand the meaning of "global competency" and how their experience abroad translates on a resumé, in a cover letter, and during a job interview.

[www2.binghamton.edu/career-development-center/quick-reference-guides/global%20competency.pdf](http://www2.binghamton.edu/career-development-center/quick-reference-guides/global%20competency.pdf)

Tillman, Martin, Ed. "Impact of Education Abroad on Career Development: Volume 1." *American Institute For Foreign Study*.

**[www.aifsabroad.com/advisors/pdf/Impact\\_of\\_Education\\_AbroadI.pdf](http://www.aifsabroad.com/advisors/pdf/Impact_of_Education_AbroadI.pdf)**

Tillman, Martin. "The Right Tool for the Job." *International Educator* 14.4 (2005). NAFSA: Association of International Educators. An essay discussing the importance of focusing on the development of a career portfolio as an undergraduate; from the perspective of a career advisor preparing graduate students to enter the workplace.

**[www.nafsa.org/\\_/File/\\_/InternationalEducator/FrontLinesJulAug05.pdf](http://www.nafsa.org/_/File/_/InternationalEducator/FrontLinesJulAug05.pdf)**



**American Institute For Foreign Study**

River Plaza  
9 West Broad Street  
Stamford, CT 06902

Phone 800.727.2437  
Fax 203.399.5597  
[www.aifsabroad.com](http://www.aifsabroad.com)