

Transforming Education Abroad From "*It Was Awesome!*" To Competitive Story

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Experiences abound for CLA students to gain valuable learning outside of the classroom to help students deepen their professional competencies and grow personally.

As higher education professionals, we all realize the benefits of education abroad, such as the ability to develop cross cultural competencies, leadership, adaptability and flexibility, and gain personal confidence. Many students seek education abroad opportunities precisely to strengthen and further develop these competencies (many of which align with CLA's [Core Career Competencies](#)).

But do organizations who are hiring CLA students see the value of these experiences as much as we do?

CLA's Employer Relations staff report that employers have mixed reactions to the value of students' education abroad experiences. A recent survey of a small sampling of our employer partners revealed that they are either positive or somewhat neutral on the topic. For example, students often list their experience abroad on their resume, but then are unable to clearly articulate the value of that experience in an interview.

If something such as education abroad seems obviously beneficial to us, why aren't those who are recruiting our students understanding the same benefits?

Here's a sampling of what we heard from these employers:

Positive

[Study abroad] allows students to adapt to global situations and helps in personal growth and confidence. Adaptability, second language skills, diversity of thought, an interest in other cultures, and cultural flexibility are always strong skills to learn.

Neutral

Depends what they are learning and if it is relevant to the position they are applying for. Gaining a life experience abroad isn't really that valuable if students can't show experience that ties to the role. It would be of value if the student communicated skills learned or enhanced by their study abroad.

An employer's' neutrality or indifference on the topic of education abroad often comes back to a common issue: A student's inability to translate their experience in language that an employer can readily understand, and in a way that directly applies to the position for which a student is being considered.

Opportunities are available prior to program departure, during a student's time abroad, and after returning home that allow students to reflect and "unpack" their experiences. Those of us who work with employers are also in a position to promote what students are doing through their education abroad experiences, thereby helping more organizations understand the value of these experiences.

Some CLA Undergraduate Education staff had the opportunity to learn more about CLA students' experiences abroad — including their internships — during an on-site workshop in September to Florence and London. We visited two University of Minnesota Centers (Study & Intern in Florence and Study & Intern in London) and University Study in the UK: Queen Mary University in London.

Each of these locations are supporting CLA's goals in Career Readiness (CR) through similar programming and curriculum, vetting quality internship sites, supporting students during their internships, and helping students articulate the value of their internship experiences.

Through CLA's CR effort, we are helping students understand and articulate their educational experiences at home and abroad in ways that set them apart and give them a distinct advantage from other liberal arts students. A key goal for this on-site workshop visit was to share information and resources we are currently developing/delivering in CLA's CR effort, and to share our respective best practices so that we can all continue to strengthen students' ability to process and articulate their experiences abroad with clear focus and purpose.

The internship experiences of the students we spoke with were inspiring. Students were working in a variety of large and small settings including a publishing company and small or family-owned businesses such as a wine shop, a hat shop, and a leather goods maker. Another internship site was with a former theater director whose business (Production Exchange), is focused on supporting the careers of new professional actors. Students were also interning at the Foundling Museum in London doing research and working on label copy.

The owners of the small businesses provided students with "on the ground floor" marketing and promotions opportunities. These students were charged with helping these small operations develop a marketing and promotions plan to ensure the owners' products were getting exposure nationally and internationally.

The business owners often knew little or nothing about marketing and social media. It was up to the students to identify, develop and "sell" a marketing plan to these owners, and then get to work executing it. Students were often coming into the internship with a framework of their work responsibilities, but they were in charge of fleshing out the details of all that needed to be done to meet the marketing needs of the business owner, whose primary focus was creating a product.

Through these internship assignments, students learned valuable skills in marketing, social media, project management, time management, strategic planning, communicating persuasively, and budgeting, among other skills. The positions also required students to be creative, self-motivated, have a strong work ethic, and the ability to work independently and with others different from themselves, to set goals and deadlines, and to meet those deadlines and expectations.

Said the owner of Production Exchange, regarding the profile of the students he looks for in his three-person organization: *We need people to embrace the opportunity rather than ask for what work needs to be done. There is a lot to do so just do it! Don't wait to be told. We need people who are self-starters, motivators, have numeric aptitude, manage data with precision, like the business we are involved with, and effectively and in a gentle yet firm way, support actors who are just starting out in their careers.*

All CLA students who study abroad have rich cultural experiences inside and outside of the classroom and have the ability to articulate precisely how those experiences should matter to future employers. The work that we are doing through CLA's CR effort to encourage prior preparation and reflection both during and after their time abroad, will enable students to better translate what some regard as "academic tourism" into a compelling story that prepares students more competitively for the job market.

More information about the Career Relevance of Learning Abroad can be found on the Learning Abroad Center's website at <https://umabroad.umn.edu/students/career-rel/>.

