

The Providence Journal

November 30, 2008

Choose the right study-abroad program

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NEW LONDON

WITH TODAY'S ECONOMY and the low value of the dollar in many nations, many college students are thinking twice before making the decision to spend an entire semester in another country. Yet, now more than ever, it is essential that college graduates enter the workplace with a broad perspective.

I urge those who seek an international experience to look intensively into study-abroad options, and also examine what is available beyond the traditional programs.

Many college students today take advantage of semester-long study abroad programs, and their education benefits tremendously from this international experience. But there are many other ways students can benefit from an international experience, for shorter periods or without leaving campus at all.

For example, check to see if the college offers short-term academic study programs and opportunities to conduct research abroad. Does it facilitate international internships and coordinate meetings with alumni who have been in that country for a length of time? Do professors conducting research abroad include students in their research? A one-to-three-week, faculty-led research trip can give students hands-on experience that complements the work of a specific course.

These types of immersion experiences deepen the intellectual discussion in

the classroom and throughout campus, and foster a global perspective among students.

International programming should operate in concert with a college's foreign-language programs. Are there a broad range of languages offered, and are the courses taught by professors with experience with the respective cultures of the language they teach? The best programs are built upon the conviction that extensive language training, coupled with a learning perspective that is more broadly culturally centered, lets students gain true insight into the language, country and culture they study.

A key test is whether, after extended exposure, students can achieve a language proficiency that helps them navigate a foreign culture. I encourage students, even if they do not intend to major in a foreign language, to talk with faculty who teach languages, to look at offered courses and to talk with other students to determine how they are applying their foreign-language studies.

Does the college also have a large population of international students, and, if so, are they fully integrated into the academic, residential and social life of the campus? Do they participate as leaders — in student government, on sports teams, through volunteer or other student activities? Importantly, are these students' varied heritages and cultures celebrated on campus? This provides a learning experience for all students.

Does the college provide an environment that fosters cross-cultural interaction? Are there dedicated spaces in

which foreign languages are expected to be spoken and in which beginners are encouraged to participate? Look for a hub, a central location that serves as an engine of global awareness for the campus community and engages students more fully in national and international issues through interdisciplinary academic programs, as well as social interaction and friendship.

Connecticut College, where a majority of students study abroad, has been a leader in developing innovative international programs for study and research. Yet we understand we must do even more. We have made it a strategic priority to inculcate an international mindset in all of our students — whether they travel abroad or remain on campus. To accomplish this, we are working to develop an International Commons, a comprehensive combination of programs and facilities designed to infuse a cross-cultural perspective into curriculum, programs and campus culture.

I have seen over and over again how students' lives are transformed by international experiences. When considering colleges, I strongly urge all students and parents to take a close look at study-abroad programming. Make sure that whatever college you choose has the right mix and the appropriate support to offer students an integrated package of academic and co-curricular international experiences — whether or not they ever set foot outside the United States.

Leo I. Higdon Jr. is president of Connecticut College.