

Study-Abroad Directors Adjust Programs in Response to Recession

By KARIN FISCHER

Portland, Ore.

With the global financial crisis bearing down, study-abroad officials are considering changes in both their immediate and long-term strategies for sending students overseas. They are budgeting more conservatively, seeking out cheaper destinations, and weighing collaborations with other colleges or private study-abroad providers.

At the same time, international educators need to remind campus leaders about the value — in today's economy more than ever — of gaining a global perspective, said speakers at the recent annual conference of the Forum on Education Abroad, a membership association of American and overseas colleges and independent education-abroad providers.

"We need to position ourselves not as an add-on," said Martha Johnson, interim director of the Learning Abroad Center at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. "If ever our graduates needed a competitive edge, it is now."

At a jam-packed session on the final day of the conference, Ms. Johnson and two of her colleagues, Adrian G. Beaulieu of Providence College and Stephen C. DePaul of the University of Texas system, talked about the results of their informal survey of study-abroad directors on the impact of the economy's woes on overseas study.

In the short term, many of those surveyed said, they were dealing with hiring freezes, reductions in office spending, and limits on travel overseas and even out of state. They are drafting budgets that anticipate stagnating or declining financial support in the next fiscal year. And they are relaxing cancellation policies to allow students to back out of programs because of personal hardship.

But some respondents are also considering far-reaching changes in the way they operate. For example, Mr. DePaul, director of global initiatives at Texas, said some colleges are taking a closer look at direct student exchanges with foreign universities or at participating in consortia, which spread costs among multiple institutions and providers.

Such approaches have often been unpopular because of their high administrative burden, said Mr. DePaul, who surveyed public and private colleges in Texas, but their lower long-term costs could make them more attractive.

Mr. Beaulieu, dean of international studies at Providence, spoke with study-abroad leaders at other private colleges in the Northeast. Several, he said, are re-examining their policy of

charging "home school" tuition for academic credits earned through education-abroad programs offered by outside providers.

Critics have suggested that colleges adopted that policy as a revenue generator, but Mr. Beaulieu argued that because most institutions continue to provide financial aid to students traveling overseas under outside programs, the practice can be a money loser. What's more, the policy has come in for some unwanted scrutiny, after the father of a recent graduate of Wheaton College, in Massachusetts, sued the liberal-arts college last year, claiming "unfair and deceptive" billing practices.

"This particular model is at risk," Mr. Beaulieu said. "How can it remain viable in this economic climate?"

An Uncertain Forecast

It is far from clear, however, even to international educators, what effect the economic downturn will have on student behavior. Will students opt for shorter trips with lower price tags or favor longer academic-term programs that allow them to use their financial aid? Will they ditch Europe for cheaper sites in Latin America, like the growing number of students at the University of Texas at Austin who are studying in Mexico instead of in Spain? Or, in a time of global financial unease, will they just stay on campus?

A few institutions have already seen enrollment declines in their study-abroad programs. Catherine Stevenson, director of the International Center at the University of Hartford, said she had to cancel one short-term program in January and two more scheduled for this summer because of a lack of student interest. "The bottom fell out," she said in an interview.

Brian J. Steffen, a professor of communication studies at Simpson College, in Iowa, said he had expected to take 30 students to France this summer to study French culture. Instead, only 10 are signed up. The trip will go forward, he said, but only because he cut costs by making the travel arrangements himself rather than relying on a tour company.

Still, if a quick show of hands at the session is any guide, most colleges have not yet seen a drop in the number of students going abroad. Another show of hands, though, indicates that study-abroad officials expect one, perhaps this fall.

But some observers pointed out that, if past trends hold true, they are worrying needlessly. In previous economic downturns, study-abroad enrollments have held steady or even climbed, said Stephen M. Ferst, director of institutional relations and development at the Education Abroad Network, a study-abroad provider.

"I think we have to be careful about doomsday scenarios," Mr. Ferst said. Current concerns, he suggested, might be "just a crisis of confidence."

Mr. DePaul noted, however, that this recession, unlike those in recent decades, was hitting middle-class professionals, like bankers and real-estate brokers. "These are the people," he said, "who send their sons and daughters on study abroad."

Startling Findings

Also at the forum's conference, a group of researchers from the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities presented findings suggesting the length of time that students study overseas has no significant impact on whether they become globally engaged later in life. That conclusion is sure to add fuel to the already fiery debate over the efficacy of increasingly popular short-term study-abroad programs.

The findings of the Study Abroad for Global Engagement project indicate that students who go overseas for four weeks or less are just as likely to become globally engaged as those who study abroad for several months or even a year.

"It's both exciting and disappointing," said Gerald W. Fry, a professor of international-development education at Minnesota and one of the study's principal investigators. "On one hand, you'd hope that studying in a country for a long period of time would be particularly meaningful." On the other, he said, the study's findings suggest that "if it's done right, if it's done with intensity of learning, a short-term program can have impact."

The Minnesota study, which surveyed nearly 6,400 graduates of 22 colleges who had studied overseas during the past five decades, sought to learn the ways in which those individuals had become globally engaged and the degree to which that engagement could be attributed to having studied abroad. The researchers defined engagement in several ways, including volunteerism and philanthropy, involvement in international and domestic political issues, and leadership in organizations that benefit the community and society.

The results of the survey, a summary of which was to be on the project's [Web site](#), found that study abroad did influence the participants to become more globally engaged.

Indeed, study-abroad alumni rated the experience as the most significant of their college years. Eighty-three percent of those surveyed said going overseas had had a strong impact on their lives. By contrast, 73 percent of the respondents said college friendships and peer connections had a strong impact, while 66 percent listed course work as having such an effect.

That result is likely to come as no surprise to international educators, who have long argued that study abroad was transformative.

More startling, and potentially more controversial, is the finding that program duration, in and of itself, seems to matter little in predicting long-term global engagement.

Short-term programs, which are typically led by faculty members, have been rising in popularity, but skeptics have criticized them as being little more than cultural tourism, saying that in many

of them students spend most of their time with other Americans and have little opportunity to immerse themselves in the local culture.

Advocates for such trips counter that they help make overseas study possible for students who might not be able to commit the time or have the financial resources to study for a semester or more.

Mr. Fry, who leads a short-term program to Thailand, said the study suggests that a more complex combination of factors makes a program effective. He and his colleagues hope to further mine the data to examine the interrelationship of a number of variables, such as whether students studied with other Americans or with foreign students.

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