

Approaches to the Overseas Experience: Three Different Success Stories Beloit College as One Example

How is success in study abroad measured? Study abroad – the most typical form of overseas educational experience at the undergraduate level in the United States – is increasingly seen as critical to young Americans’ education. Indeed, the 2005 Lincoln Commission report calls for a significant increase in study abroad enrollments as way to ensure the health of the U.S. as, “What nations don’t know can hurt them.” The Lincoln Commission defines success in study abroad as producing “internationally competent” graduates by teaching undergraduates about “other lands, languages, and cultures.”¹

Colleges and universities may use a range of quantitative and qualitative methods for determining the success of their approach to study abroad. At Beloit College, what has constituted success in study abroad has changed over time.

Study abroad success at Beloit at different stages of development

Like many institutions, Beloit College’s program of study abroad began in earnest in the 1960s and can be loosely divided into three stages of development, each characterized by different markers of success.

Mid-20th Century: Selective Faculty Management and Ownership

As was true elsewhere in the U.S., Beloit College initiated an international education program in the 1960s, focusing on international relations, area studies, and language instruction as well as faculty-led study abroad related to these. *At this stage, study abroad was successful in impacting students, faculty, and the curriculum in particular subject areas.*

Late-20th Century: Professionalization and Democratization

The appointment of an administrator to head the World Affairs Center, manage the World Outlook Program, and provide international student services marked the professionalization of international education at Beloit College. In this period, affiliations with universities abroad (direct enrollment, exchanges) began to replace faculty-led seminars, and participation rates increased. *At this stage, success in study abroad was defined by its expansion to students in more majors, cost control through the use of direct enrollment and exchanges, and an increase in the international student population through the enrollment of exchange students.*

Early-21st Century: Shared Ownership/Campus Internationalization

The campus shifts away from a reliance study abroad and international student enrollments *as* international education to focus more attention on the integration of these with the curriculum. *At this stage, success in study abroad is focused more on the learning outcomes for individual students, as well as how study abroad impacts the wider campus.*

Basic Facts about Study Abroad at Beloit College in 2009

- 50% of students spend one or more semesters abroad before graduation;
- Approximately ½ of study abroad takes place through exchanges and direct enrollment in universities abroad, the other ½ through third party provider programs;
- The average number of students at any one site is 2-3; and
- There is a cap on the amount of tuition that can transfer off-campus; financial aid and scholarships apply to study abroad tuition up to the cap.

Why was change needed? Why move to campus internationalization?

Student reports such as, “I regret I hung out with Americans most of the time and didn’t really improve my Spanish,” or, “Academically, I didn’t really learn a lot,” indicated Beloit College’s approach to study abroad was not entirely working. Similarly, faculty reports such as “I don’t know what they do when they study abroad” indicated that study abroad might be too removed from the day-to-day educational program of a college campus. Numbers also told a story: while half of its student body gained some kind of international experience, either through study abroad or by virtue of coming from abroad to Beloit, this still left a significant percentage without such experience. Another reality was that while exchange programs kept the cost of study abroad to the institution relatively low, they could not serve students in all majors and sometimes isolated students in international student dorms and language classes.

¹ *Global Competence and National Needs: One Million Americans Studying Abroad.* Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program, November 2005.

Campus internationalization involves paying attention to daily practice on a campus, and puts responsibility for international learning not just on students, but on the other members of the campus community. Further, instead of approaching international education as a set of discrete activities, these are connected strategically to achieve greater impact on the institution as well as individuals. Beloit College moved toward campus internationalization to address its concerns about study abroad learning outcomes, access to study abroad for students in all majors, and the impact of study abroad on the campus itself.

How did change occur?

Study abroad at Beloit College was strengthened – and continues to be – by 1) setting new expectations for study abroad learning, 2) enlisting faculty to better integrate study abroad into the campus curriculum, and 3) making learning outcomes more visible. These steps in turn have helped the College better understand the unique challenges and opportunities posed by study abroad, strengthen its exchange programs through the development of a set of courses linked to a theme of Cities in Transition, help students think more knowledgeably about the relationship of study abroad to the rest of their education and their post-graduation activities, and control the cost of study abroad through use of a mix of program options and matching these to individual students' educational paths.

Examples of student paths through study abroad:

Natalie: comparative literature and international relations majors. One semester in France through a third-party provider, a second in Senegal through a Beloit program, where she takes Dakar in Transition. Course project: documentary film on unemployment among university graduates. Returns to campus, presents the documentary in the College's International Symposium, studies the relationship between economic security and human rights. Post-graduation: interns with a Danish human rights organization and the European parliament. Long-term plans: graduate school in peace and reconciliation, career addressing human rights.

Tom: health and society major. Takes a course on Nicaragua in Transition: Health and Microcredit, which compares health and poverty in Beloit and Nicaragua, where students spend one week. Studies in Kenya. Field research project: Maasai health beliefs and practices. Summer internship in the Republic of Georgia, collecting data about trust in physicians. Post-graduation: Rotary International Scholarship for research on HIV vulnerability in Kenya. Long-term plans: study public health and African studies, career in international development and health.

Examples of faculty engagement:

An international relations professor who studies Latin American political economy participates in a group faculty development trip to Japan. Begins to incorporate Japan into his research agenda and teaching. Serves on the international committee, gains a greater understanding study abroad for students across the campus. Travels to Ecuador with a second faculty group, incorporates materials about Ecuador into his teaching. Participates in a Cities in Transition workshop to experiment with different teaching techniques. Incorporates field research projects focused on Beloit into his teaching. Contributes a chapter on incorporating study abroad into the senior thesis to a book project.

Paying attention to quality and cost:

As more Beloit students began studying abroad in their major, the College needed to expand the range of programs it uses. Its strategy to contain cost while preserving educational quality has been to: 1) invest in its exchange programs through site visits, curricular innovations (the Cities in Transition project), and strengthening program administration, 2) expand opportunities for direct enrollment and exchanges by joining a multilateral student exchange program, and 3) making selective use of third party provider programs, based on student preparation and fit. To maintain robust numbers and manage cost to the institution, it has set a cap on the tuition that can leave campus. It preserves access by offering many opportunities whose tuition falls below the cap and providing some travel scholarships.

Lessons learned

Beloit College's internationalization proves has taught it that 1) its approach to education abroad will continue to evolve over time as conditions and thinking change, 2) assessment can act as a positive driver of change, 3) visible outcomes of internationalization can both provide models for others as well as encourage broad ownership, and 4) on-going attention and investment (time, funding) are needed for continued innovation and success.