



## Leveraging the Study Abroad Experience

### **It's all about the skills**

How do you incorporate a study abroad experience into a resume and cover letter? How do you weave it into an interview without telling long winded stories? How do you make this significant experience relevant in the job search?

These are some of the questions that we hope to answer with this resource.

When employers see study abroad listed on a resume, they want to know how your experiences have given you a set of skills that will be a good fit for them and will, in the long run, be an asset to them. Think about the specific skills you used every day while in an overseas setting. This can include skills used in an internship, volunteer experience, classroom, living situation and travel. Distilling the experience into a skill set is key. Here are just a few ideas to get you started:

Below are some words and phrases to help you articulate the skills that are often honed or developed through a study abroad experience.

#### Words and phrases to incorporate into a resume:

Adaptable	Motivated	Self-directed	Flexible
Responsive	Organized	Independent	Empathetic
Self-sufficient	Capable	Self knowledgeable	Equipped
Ability to deal with ambiguity		Ability to understand non-verbal cues	
Increased confidence			

#### **Practical steps in the resume process**

When you read a job description for your desired position ask yourself:

- 1) What specific skills are mentioned and what can you pull from your experience abroad to strengthen your case?
- 2) Make a list of your transferable skills and the job qualifications, and then match them up, being sure to highlight these in both your resume and interview.

Besides thinking about the appropriate words and phrases to include in your resume, there are some very practical elements which you should pull from your study abroad experience and insert in your resume. These include:

- 1) List the overseas university you attended, or IFSA program name (especially if the name provides context for what you studied).
- 2) If applicable, include language proficiency (you will want to be very accurate in your assessment on language skills. Ask a faculty as to how you might accurately articulate language proficiency).
- 3) If applicable, list participation in a directed research project, independent study project, or documentary film project, and be sure to include the topic. Here is an example from a student who studied in Buenos Aires, Argentina: Directed Research Project “Modern Poverty: The Social Movement of the Cartoneros”
- 4) Study Abroad internships are an obvious detail to include, but be sure to also list any activity that is relevant whether it is paid, volunteer, part of a course, etc. Again, focus on skills gained.

Link yourself to the position. The more clearly you can demonstrate the match between your skills and the employer’s needs through your resume, the more effective you will be in obtaining an interview.

### **Cover letters and the International Experience**

This is the place where you can get the employers attention and tell them a bit more about your international experience that did not quite fit elsewhere in your resume. However, you want to remember that the cover letter should be concise and yet allow them to see what you can offer them. A strong cover letter should include the following:

- 1) It targets a specific employer. No one is going to read a generic cover letter
- 2) Conveys your interest and enthusiasm
- 3) Emphasizes your relevant skills and experiences
- 4) Contains no errors (get multiple eyes to read it)

Your international experience is a differentiating factor but again, highlight back to a skill that you can bring to the table. For example:

“Working in cross-cultural teams in my marketing class at Westminster University in London has given me insight into the varying communications styles and adaptability necessary in this type of position.”

### **Cover letter’s rhymes and reasons**

There is a specific way in which to write a cover letter. It should contain specific elements.

- 1) The Introductory paragraph (You)
  - a. Introduce yourself and why you are writing (You)
  - b. Why interested in this particular position (You)
- 2) Body of Letter (Them and You)
  - a. What is the employer seeking? Skills/strengths? Education? Experience? (Them)
  - b. How does your background match their requests? (You)
  - c. This is the place where a specific and concise example from your study overseas is appropriate.

### 3) Closure

- a. Final statement of interest/qualifications
- b. Clear information about interests and availability
- c. Thank them for your time and consideration

A resume and cover letter should be concise enough that someone is willing to read it. It is also the place to clearly articulate the skill set that they require for the job, and to indicate that you have these skills. Remember, the cover letter and resume are tools to use to get an interview.

Unpacking your study abroad experience and concisely getting it down to a set of skills or an articulation of transferable skills is not an easy process. Use alumni, fellow professionals, your study abroad office and, of course, your career services office on campus to sift through your experiences to find what is relevant for a job search and a particular job.

### **The Informational Interview**

Again, a resume and a cover letter are tools that are needed to apply for a job; however, there are other ways to figure out what job might be a good fit for you.

If you are one of the many who return from a study abroad experience and “want to do something international” you are not alone. But how do you find that job that has an international component that is of interest? How do you even know what is available? This is where the informational interview is of great value. Most people like to talk about themselves. In an informational interview, that is precisely what you are asking them to do. An informational interview allows you to:

- 1) Learn how people get into the job you may want
- 2) To determine if you want to get into that field
- 3) To find out if there are certain skills or credentials required for the job of your dreams
- 4) To learn the organizational language or the language of that field that is tied to a particular job or jobs.

It is also customary and expected that you ask if there is anyone else that they would recommend you speak with to get another perspective on the field you are pursuing. This allows you to get a wide picture of a particular field. It also gets you in front of people who may be in charge of hiring or who may know of a job before it is posted. The informational interview is a nonthreatening way to educate yourself, find potential work, find the job that is a good fit for your skills and pass along your resume without asking for a job and without the competition of other resumes.

### **Being prepared for the Informational Interview**

- 1) Come prepared with a list of questions you would like to ask (have someone, preferably a professional person, read them to make sure they are solid and you are not missing anything)
- 2) Be prepared to depart from the list and ask a follow up to something that the person has said that you did not understand or was of interest.
- 3) Don't worry about asking them to clarify acronyms or skills required in a job. Every job has its own lingo and people tend to use it forgetting that not everyone knows what it means. Again,

since you are only asking for information asking for clarification is fine. Once you apply for a job you should have already done your homework!

The informational interview process can begin at any time; there is no need to wait until after graduation. The first contact can be the hardest since after that you will likely be given further contacts, however, using campus resources is key. It is highly likely that the faculty and staff around you know people who are doing what you think you might want to do and are happy to make the initial contact for you. After that you will find that you will be passed along from one professional to another.

You can leverage your international experience regardless of the field you enter. Be sure to keep your skills honed and have realistic expectations about the truly international positions. You often have to pay your dues before you are on a plane again. However, one thing is almost certain, if you have been overseas once, you will be overseas again. It just happens.