

Overseas Internships Proliferate and Evolve

IN THE INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION'S 2017 *Open Doors Report* on International Educational Exchange, a section recognizes the “growing importance” of non-credit, study abroad experiences, including work, internships, and volunteering experiences.

In 2015–16, 23,125 students from 1,412 U.S. schools participated in overseas, noncredit programs, including internships. Geographically, 38.1 percent of those students undertook noncredit experiences in Latin America and the Caribbean, followed by Europe (14.5 percent), Asia (10 percent), and Africa (5 percent). Other regions represented 4.3 percent collectively, and another 28.3 percent was unknown.

Although internships abroad aren't new, more institutions are formally administering them, according to Jennifer Evanuk Baird, who directs Georgia Tech's Global Internship Program and International Plan. “There is definitely an uptick in schools looking to establish a formal international internship program,” she says, meaning that they are dedicating staff and resources to managing the programs rather than relying on study abroad or career services offices to add the responsibility to their portfolios.

The term “internship” itself is expanding to suit evolving student needs, according to Evanuk Baird. Where internships used to suggest corporate environments, today's internships increasingly take place in research labs, nonprofits, NGOs, and start-ups. “International internships provide direct value to our students' career development and future employability, making them attractive to students, parents, and universities—and even to the employers themselves,” she says.

As overseas internship programs proliferate, they present both challenges and opportunities—to students and to schools.

“Students see interning abroad as a way to kill two birds with one stone,” says Emily Merson, cofounder and CEO of Global Experiences, which provides international internships in 11 global cities, in partnership with more than 50 schools. “They are able to experience another culture at a deep level of immersion, while at the same time gaining practical real-world work experience that will look very attractive to future employers.”

Internships overseas can force students outside of their

comfort zones, according to Evanuk Baird. “They must adapt to the workplace culture as well as the national culture, and they must work with colleagues who likely come from different generations than their own,” she says.

But there are challenges, cautions Michelle Kern Hall, interim director of the University of Wisconsin-Madison's international internship program. Particularly in the business and engineering fields, students often have to pass up paid internships back home for unpaid internships abroad. “That can be a tough decision for some to justify economically,” she says. “We focus on internships that offer some support, as well as scholarships to make up the difference, as it is a top question from our students as they explore interning abroad.”

Colleges and universities also face challenges as they increasingly manage internship programs abroad. Hands-on development and facilitation of internships are “very resource-intensive and difficult to scale for a university,” says Kern Hall, although she says it's exciting to work with alumni and other partners to create student opportunities.

International travel, let alone travel abroad and international internships for students, “is fraught with missteps in a politically changed world,” says Tony Johnson, president of Academic Internship Council, which merged in 2014 with the Council on International Educational Exchange. But as fraught as it is, Johnson says it benefits everyone to have students travel, study, and work in different cities and become embedded in different cultures.

“It has never been more important that overseas trips be meticulously prepared,” he says. “This begins with the whole visa process, respecting the immigration and employment regulations of the host nation, and a sensitivity to the local culture. Clear, fast, and efficient health and safety measures need to be in place, with equally clear reporting structures in the event of a local incident.”



Administering an international internship program differs dramatically from managing a traditional study abroad program, according to Evanuk Baird, of Georgia Tech. “It requires that the managers have a solid understanding of the industries their students work in, and position themselves within their university to find out who on their campus already has relationships with companies that can be leveraged for international placements,” she says.

International internship administrators need to network off campus, both within local business communities and with alumni, organizations, and companies abroad. “The manager should be comfortable speaking with HR representatives as well as higher-level executives about their business and recruiting needs in order to determine the most effective way to partner with those companies and to find student interns to fill those positions,” Evanuk Baird says.

Vetting and risk management procedures get far more complicated when students are being sent to dozens, or even hundreds, of different organizations each year. That’s usually too many for administrators to visit in person before placing students, so virtual vetting is necessary.

For those reasons, universities need to be realistic about what they can accomplish with the resources and staff that they have. Start small, Evanuk Baird advises, perhaps in one place where the

school already has a strong presence. And partnering with a third party can help to scale up.

Evanuk Baird has noticed that some schools heavily restrict where and for how long students can intern abroad. Some may only permit internships during a six-to-eight-week period over the summer. That’s a mistake, she says, because it doesn’t fit employers’ needs. If many can’t have interns for a span of four to six months, it’s not worth it for them to bring an international intern over, train them, and assign them meaningful work. “Universities should be flexible to accommodate the needs of the host employers,” she says.

In three decades of international internships experience, Johnson, of Academic Internship Council, has noticed two major trends. Students can now intern in cities like Berlin, Prague, Barcelona, and others without needing to speak the local language in ways that were previously impossible. “This opens up opportunities for students from North America and elsewhere that did not exist before,” he says.

And the fields are broadening, he says. “The industries and sectors in which students choose to do their placements have gradually shifted away from the corporate multinational finance or commerce sectors, to an interest in entrepreneurialism, start-ups, hi-tech, conservation, and sustainability.” ■

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