

To Boldy Go

Learn leadership by studying abroad

By Jen Miller

To go or not to go, that's the question that many student leaders face when given the opportunity to study abroad. Is it worth leaving your friends, school, and campus leadership positions for a semester or year to learn in another country? Do you take the risk that your organization may suffer without you?

The answer is a resounding "yes." Studying abroad can give you leadership skills that no other experience can, such as a sense of diversity, the ability to meet new people, and courage—not to mention the cultural and academic experiences that these programs promote. Gaining leadership skills is usually an unintended yet welcome benefit of studying abroad.

Dr. Richard Piper, who directs the Honors Program at the **University of Tampa** in Florida, started a study-abroad opportunity for a handful of honors students to **Oxford University** in England each semester. He can see the difference in those students who go. "Most participants return with greatly enhanced self-confidence and sophistication," Piper says. "Many participants have told me that it changed their lives decisively for the better."

Gaining Experience

For Christy Melton, a senior at **Centenary College** of Louisiana, a study abroad opportunity in Belgium was a way to learn more about her chosen field, French. "I've been a French student for seven years, but nothing prepares you for speaking your language abroad," Melton says. "My skills improved immeasurably because I wasn't afraid to jump in and just learn."

Melton also is an active campus leader, holding positions in her Residence Hall Association, as the National Residence Hall Honorary Vice-President, and as a resident assistant. Melton has a unique spin on how her time abroad has improved her leadership skills. "I learned to be more open-minded, much more than I thought before I left," she says. The ability to remain open-minded has helped Melton make clearer, more rational decisions in her leadership roles.

Helpful Websites

Check with your school's international office to view available programs. Find other opportunities at the following web sites:
American Institute for Foreign Study—www.aifsabroad.com
Oxford Study Abroad Programme—www.studyabroad.com/osap
PlanetEdu—www.planetedu.com
Institute for American Universities—www.iaufrance.org
Institute of International Education—www.iie.org
International Studies Abroad—www.studiesabroad.com

At **New Mexico State University**, Ryan Cody, a marketing major, immersed himself in the Swedish culture during his time at **Vaxjo University** in Sweden. As a member of the NMSU American Marketing Association, he worked in Swedish business firms while abroad. "There were so many other students from other countries...it was like a microcosm of the world," Cody says.

While Cody raves about his time abroad, he stresses that gaining experience from traveling abroad is an active process; just going won't necessarily gain you more. "Some people wouldn't open themselves up to seeing the world from another perspective," he says.

Diversity and Worldview

UT's Sean Manning knew he couldn't miss the chance to go to Oxford even though he was an integral part of men's crew. "I was curious and wanted to see what it was like somewhere else," Manning says.

What he found was a different view of the world around him. "I was given a sharper, though hopefully not too cynical, perspective," says Manning, adding that he learned to be humble, which is an important skill for any leader working in a university community. His experience abroad helped him take over as assistant editor-in-chief of *The Minaret*, UT's student newspaper, and he eventually stepped in as editor-in-chief when the previous one went to study abroad. Also, Manning found his own alternative to missing a season of crew in the U.S.—he joined an Oxford team.

The **University of Central Florida's** James Coffin is currently studying in England at **Newbold College**, and he already is gaining a different worldview. "There are far more opportunities here to learn about other cultures and traditions," Coffin says. "My eyes have already been opened to seeing things through the eyes of others in a whole new way—a more complete way."

New People Perspective

Students who study abroad are dropped into an unfamiliar culture where they must fend for themselves, and this means meeting new people on their

own. "I'm more aware of how people approach the same situation, and I'll be more prepared to deal with and approach a person's individual differences," Coffin says.

Christine Evans, a senior at **Rutgers-Camden University** in New Jersey agrees. She's taken a broader approach to studying abroad, spending her winter, spring, and summer breaks in different parts of the world. So far, she's traveled to Ireland, South Africa, and Spain.

Evans says that studying abroad helped her reach out to more people when she returned to the U.S. "I'm much more outgoing now, willing to talk to anyone." This is especially important for Evans since she's in charge of recruiting new members for Amnesty International. "When I was



COURTESY JEN MILLER

Traveling abroad in England and Greece gave Jen Miller the chance to study, sightsee, and develop her leadership skills.

abroad, I had to learn how to approach people to ask for help, so talking to fellow students has become much easier and fun."

Amazing Results

Manning is now a graduate student at **The New School** in New York, and he doubts he could have been so successful there without his time abroad. "It'll be the most amazing experience of your life," Evans says. **SL**

Jen Miller is a grad student at Rutgers University-Camden Campus where she is studying for an M.A. in English literature. She also is a freelance writer and served as editor-in-chief of UT's student paper, The Minaret. Contact Miller at dzjen27@hotmail.com.



Find study-abroad tips for first-time travelers at www.studentleader.com