

# RECRUITING STUDENTS TO STUDY ABROAD

Richard A. Straw  
History Department  
Radford University

## INTRODUCTION

Research nation-wide has shown that if students are given the chance to study abroad without delaying graduation and without incurring significant financial burdens they will take it. But many students will not take this step on their own. Consequently, actively recruiting students to make the commitment to study abroad becomes crucial.

In one very significant sense recruiting students to study abroad involves selling your program or idea to them. Some faculty members are uncomfortable in this role but it is vital when you speak with students not only to be enthusiastic about your academic program but also to be at ease discussing all aspects of the experience including the social and cultural opportunities your students will have. In fact, for many or perhaps most college students who go abroad the social and cultural opportunities represent the greatest attraction. Like everything we do as professors most of the work we do to recruit students to study abroad involves educating them about the benefits and opportunities that await them if they just take the first step.

Most recruitment efforts involve one-on-one conversations with students who already have an interest in going abroad for either a summer program or longer. It is very important to take a broad stroke approach to recruitment by distributing flyers, sending out blanket emails to your majors, making announcements in class, and even putting ads in campus publications. But even then most students who respond favorably to a flyer or sign up at the Study Abroad Fair will need to be convinced in person that your program is right for them. What follows are some suggestions and strategies that have worked for me over the years and perhaps they will help you as well to recruit effectively and successfully.

## RECRUITING STRATEGIES

**If you are directing a study abroad program for the first time or for the fifth time, be aware that effective recruiting takes considerable time and effort, perhaps more than you may initially anticipate.** For

example, an average conversation with a prospective student could take as long as an hour. By the time you go over the travel details, the costs, the opportunities for side trips and optional experiences, financial aid, and your academic policies it could easily take this long to explain your program thoroughly. During the period of the most intense recruitment you will have to be in your office enough so students that may drop by can find you. Accessibility is a significant issue for students who want information about a program. Successful study abroad directors will testify that planning and recruiting students is nearly a year-long process.

To ensure the greatest possible success for your program, begin recruiting students as soon as possible. If yours is a new program you need not wait for budget approval before starting to recruit. You can very easily get a rough estimate of the overall cost of your program that is adequate for the initial conversations you will have with prospective study abroad students. A quick check on the Internet can give you enough information about hotel rates and airfare to get the conversation started and to answer their initial inquiries about cost. At this stage most students just want a general idea of how much money they will need. If you are an experienced study abroad director you should also get started as soon as school starts. Use your program from the previous summer as a starting point even if you plan to change some aspects of it. Initial conversations with students can be sketchy if you are enthusiastic.

There are many ways to promote your program. Promotion and recruitment are similar but there are differences. Promoting is getting the word out to prospective students. It is obviously important to spread the word about your program to a wide audience because this will, of course, increase your pool of potential applicants. But again, recruitment is often done one-on-one. The research confirms my experience that most students who are interested in going on a study abroad program arrive at that decision without making a definitive choice of which program to participate in. At this point many students will begin to shop around for a program that fits their interests and needs. So by the time you actually sit down to talk with a student he or she is likely to have decided that a study abroad experience is definitely a possibility. It is your job then to present your program in the most favorable light. To get the process started there are many things that you can and need to do in order to promote your program to a large number of students.

- Promote the program in your classes. This is one of the most effective methods of advertising because you are starting with a group of students that know you. Take the time to explain the program in a highly energetic fashion and if you have them show

pictures of the places that you've visited with previous groups or show pictures of places you intend to visit if this is your first time. Students respond quite favorably to photos of far-away places and photos are certainly an effective attention getter.

- Send emails and/or mail informational letters and brochures to targeted groups of students. This could be the majors and minors in your department or students electing a concentration in other departments for which courses in your program have particular relevance.
- Contact your RU colleagues, give them multiple copies of your flyers and ask them to tell their classes about the program-- especially colleagues in your own department and in others that offer courses that may relate to your program.
- If this is at least your second year directing a program keep in touch with your alumni and ask them to help publicize your program. Student-to-student contacts are invaluable. Students considering study abroad find it highly worthwhile to talk with former participants who will share their experiences, generate enthusiasm, and answer questions. Invite former participants to visit your classes during recruitment and to take part in your interest and orientation meetings.
- Prepare a visually exciting display to use at the Study Abroad Fair and if possible keep it set up in your office for students to see throughout the school year. Invite alumni to help out at the Study Abroad Fair. Have students sign an interest sheet with their email addresses it.
- Follow up with an email to all of these students very soon after the Study Abroad Fair. Invite them to your office and give them a specific time that you will be there. Have detailed information to give anyone who comes by your office to talk about the program including information about where you'll be staying, what they can expect to see and do, the academic requirements, and the costs. Keep this email contact list to use next year as your first mass email. Students who may not have been able to go one year could easily be in a position to go the next year so you should keep in touch with this group.
- Also relatively soon after the Study Abroad Fair send an announcement via email to all the students who signed your interest sheet plus all of the majors and minors in your department and invite them to attend an interest session. Some

research suggests that you should hold at least two interest meetings and to be sure to hold them at staggered times, so that as many interested students as possible can attend. At these meetings you should present a well-organized and highly visual explanation of your program. While not diminishing the importance of the academic component of the program I think it is important to emphasize the cultural and travel opportunities that study abroad offer. Students, after all, want to study abroad because it is abroad and not home. Explain the components of your program in detail and give them a good idea of the optional travel opportunities that may be available to them. Explain the credits and the costs, but emphasize the excitement and adventure that such a program will involve. It is also very important to explain the financial aid options that are available to almost all students who are interested in studying abroad. You might even use quotes from other study abroad students that testify to the potentially life-changing experience study abroad can be.

- Lastly a web site that you maintain that promotes your program can be a very effective tool to recruit students.

### **ADVERTISING YOUR PROGRAM**

A program brochure and website have two purposes: to promote your program and to provide information about it. Your brochure or flyer should have several parts: the cover blurb, a section on the academic component (including course descriptions), information about costs and participation eligibility, and, finally, your contact information.

The cover or opening blurb gives a general (and appealing) description of the program and of what makes it exciting and worthwhile. The interior or main text gives more detailed information about the program, its location, sights to be seen, where you'll be staying, etc.

A section on the academic component gives relevant information about the nuts and bolts of the program's academic side (who the faculty will be, special educational activities, credits, etc.). Course descriptions are essential. It is also important to note which courses fill which requirements, if any.

Information about costs and financial aid, including any appropriate disclaimers, should also appear in your brochure. Cost information should include tuition costs for both resident and non-resident students as well as accurate information about prepaid costs and what the students' overall expenditures will likely be.

Participation requirements (if any) should also be a part of every brochure. This information includes who is eligible for the program, language or course prerequisites, grade and credit requirements, etc.

Finally, the brochure and website should include contact information including your name, office address, phone, fax, and email and mailing address.

### **ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS FOR PROMOTING YOUR PROGRAM AND RECRUITING STUDENTS**

- At the interest meetings give a power-point presentation that outlines not only information about the program but also information about the country/countries on your itinerary and their cultures.
- Students are very interested in the cost of the trip so you need to do as much research as you can about the actual costs they will incur for travel, food, lodging, gifts, admission charges, etc.
- Develop specific study abroad arguments in your field. You might develop an Academic Interest Advising Sheet as an advising tool that introduces students to study abroad opportunities in your field of interest. These are designed to motivate students to begin planning for a study abroad experience that incorporates their curricular interests. These one page sheets could be distributed by advisors at the beginning of each academic year. These advising sheets can address two important issues directly: most students can study abroad and still graduate on time; and almost everyone can afford to study abroad.
- Focus groups, anecdotal evidence, and surveys with faculty, staff, and students have all pointed to the cost of study abroad as the largest barrier to increased student participation. Further investigation shows this issue to have two faces. There is the problem of perception-- people think that study abroad is unaffordable, but they don't really know what that means, and the problem of cost and resources-- there really are expensive study abroad options, and students really are in a tight financial squeeze.
- Dr. Flory's office has a great deal of information that presents a broad and consistent message about the value of study abroad across the curriculum. Much of this material provides clear and

easily accessible information and encourages early planning and preparation. Careful use of this material can help students put the cost and the benefits of study abroad into perspective. Research and careful planning on your part can help dispel many students' pre-conceived notions about the unaffordable cost of study abroad. Most financial aid may be applied to study abroad. The costs of some programs are comparable to what you would pay here on campus. Make sure you compare all costs.

- Studying abroad does not have to delay graduation! With advanced planning, students can arrange for many study abroad courses to fulfill degree requirements. In addition to major, minor, and general education requirements, there are other college requirements, such as field experience, internship, or electives outside the major that can be fulfilled with study abroad.
- The many benefits—academic, professional, and personal—of your international experience will be long lasting.

In closing the following represent the most frequently asked questions that you will hear from students concerning Study Abroad opportunities. You should be prepared to answer them. Here are some simple suggestions:

- ***Why should I study abroad?*** Have you ever found yourself staring at a photograph of some far away place and thinking, “I would love to go there!” Well, this is your chance. Prepare yourself for an adventure of a lifetime.
- ***Do I need to know a foreign language?*** This depends, of course, on your program but generally the answer is no.
- ***Can I afford it?*** With very few exceptions the answer is a resounding yes. With careful planning and consultation with the Financial Aid Office, cost should not be a deterrent.
- ***Will the courses count towards my major?*** Again with careful planning and work with an advisor this is possible quite often.
- ***Will I still be able to graduate on time?*** With careful planning students who study abroad will be able to graduate in four years.
- ***How will study abroad help me?*** Thousands of American students who study abroad come back from their experience and say “it was life changing.” Yet, like so many things in life, “you won’t know it until you try it.” Students learn to become more confident and self-reliant and see the world through different lenses. Prospective employers are also looking increasingly for future employees who have a more global view and broader

perspective and understanding in the complex world in which we live. Many students are beginning to recognize that in addition to the wonderful opportunities for personal growth and adventure that study abroad offers it is also a great resume builder.



**Figure 1 R.U. Students at the William Wallace Statue, The Borders, near Melrose, Scotland.**