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News

Study Abroad Plus

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Goucher College made a splash when it adopted [a college-wide study abroad requirement](#) in 2006. So far, other colleges haven't followed suit, exactly -- but some have added requirements that could be described as study abroad-plus, to be fulfilled either through study abroad or another form of experiential, off-campus learning.

"What seems to be happening is campuses are being very thoughtful about how to develop layers of international learning opportunities that mutually reinforce each other. You don't see only study abroad, in terms of putting all your eggs in one basket. It becomes part of your strategy but not the entire strategy. I think it's probably wise," said Brian Whalen, president and CEO of the Forum on Education Abroad.

"It's in a way humbling for study abroad people," Whalen said. "We're realizing that, wait a minute, it should be part of an integrated approach and there are other ways in which we can educate faculty and students about the world and those are effective as well. It's not one size fits all."

At St. Mary's College of Maryland, for instance, components of [the new core curriculum introduced this year](#) include a first-year seminar, "Introduction to the Liberal Arts," and an outside-the-classroom requirement called, "Experiencing the Liberal Arts in the World." Students can fulfill that latter requirement either by studying abroad on a semester-long St. Mary's program or a study-tour course taught by the college's faculty (other study abroad programs would be subject to pre-approval); taking a course designated as featuring a significant experiential or service learning component; completing an internship or pre-approved work experience; or undertaking an independent study in a community organization.

Currently, about 40 percent of St. Mary's students study abroad, and the goal is to bring that figure to 65. Elizabeth Nutt Williams, dean of the core curriculum and first-year experience, expects study abroad participation to spike even higher -- it's her guess that it'll rise to about 70 percent. However, rather than focus solely on study abroad, she said that the college wanted to make the requirement flexible, for practical and pedagogical reasons.

"I would say it wasn't just for practical reasons, although I think the practical reasons are important. I think that as a public institution we are about access, and so it's really important to us that our requirements don't presume anything about our students either financially or in terms of practical life situations. There is that piece that not everybody potentially could study abroad for a semester; that's just not something necessarily that each student could opt to do. But it's strongly encouraged because we think it's a great experience to have," Williams said.

"But really pedagogical reasons were the primary reason we took this direction. We feel like there are lots of ways that you can experience the liberal arts in the world."

Arcadia University, which is known for its study abroad programs, is requiring a ["Global Connections Experience and Reflection"](#) as part of its revamped core curriculum, also launched this academic year. Students can fulfill the requirement through studying abroad, studying away domestically, or taking a course at the Pennsylvania campus designated as offering a "sustained cross-cultural experience."

A course called ["Hispanic Experience in Philadelphia,"](#) for instance, requires students to spend two hours a week tutoring elderly residents in English. But that's not all. "When students do one of those local options, we're trying to mirror the intensity of study abroad even though we can't, completely," said Ellen Skilton-Sylvester, associate professor of education and director of Global Connections at Arcadia. In addition to about 20 hours of experiential learning tied to a course, students "need to have another set of at least 15 hours either in that same community or in another organization that addresses that same issue," she said. In the case of the students

working as tutors, they also spend an extra 15 hours working with an arts and cultural organization in the Puerto Rican community, Skilton-Sylvester said.

And in terms of study abroad, "We're defining sustained as semester-long," Skilton-Sylvester said. "So yes, any of our semester-long programs would count, but what's happening with shorter-term programs is we're in the process of creating ways that we include a longer experience around those short-term experiences." All students take a reflection course during their Global Connections experience.

"We really were quite intentional when we created multiple ways for students to do this," said Jerry M. Greiner, Arcadia's president. "We are working very hard to integrate what we are doing in terms of global/international with what we are considering global/local."

Along similar lines, a new requirement at Susquehanna University this fall will mandate that students study away, domestically or internationally, as a prerequisite for a reflection course they take upon return ([see a story about Susquehanna's new requirement here](#)).

Goucher, meanwhile, remains committed to the educational value of "universal study abroad." The first students affected by its study abroad requirement are juniors this year and, of about 300, 95 percent have already studied abroad or are signed up for programs this summer or in the January term, said Daniel Norton, associate dean of the Office of International Studies. That leaves about 15 with whom the college is still working, Norton said, some of whom may be postponing their graduation until December 2010 for other reasons.

Two or three students petitioned for and were granted exemptions based on something documented, like a medical condition. Those granted exemptions still need to complete an off-campus experience through the career development office, Norton said.

In terms of practical considerations, Goucher provides a \$1,200 voucher to help students pay for study abroad. Another obstacle the college has run into, aside from financial ones, is how to help students with low grade point averages access study abroad, as many programs have minimum GPA requirements.

"We've learned a lot as we've implemented this and worked through those exceptional cases of students either with medical issues or financial issues," Norton said. "Certainly a student's financial situation shouldn't be a deterrent to them studying abroad, but how we navigate that has really been an ongoing development, as with students with lower GPAs, how we can work to ensure they have a good study abroad experience. It's developing enough programs for the students, with enough variety [in terms] of locations and program length."

At the same time, Norton said, "There have been some interesting changes where I think we're recruiting more students who are coming to Goucher because of our study abroad requirement. Students are self-selecting in a way to come to Goucher because they want study abroad."

— Elizabeth Redden