

Studying abroad not out of reach

Planning from freshman year key to taking semester outside U.S.

By Marissa Broe
Contributing Writer

Some may remember my column last year, where I shared a few of my tricks of the trade when it came to mastering college. Befriend your professors, and take risks. Now I am offering advice on an oldie but goodie: **PLAN AHEAD.**

You're just days away from your freshman year of college. Nerves are high, expectations higher; this is the beginning of the rest of your life, right?

Sadly students, it is.

But rather than spending this time telling tales that will scare you, I want to discuss one opportunity that is worth planning for: studying abroad. Having just spent my spring semester in Spain, it is my newfound goal to spread the amazing word of an experience overseas to all college students I can reach.

And of course, I want to reinforce the idea that this opportunity would not have been possible without advance planning.

So here are some facts and figures. Every November, the Institute of International Education publishes its *The Open Doors* report with statistics concerning Americans studying outside the country. The most recent information (2005-2006 school year) reports 223,534 students studied abroad. Of this number, 65.6 percent were female and 34.5 percent male.

Sure a little more than 200,000 weighs pretty low versus the 15.9 million students the U.S. Census says are enrolled in colleges and universities this fall. But you have to break it down, and think that, of that 200,000-plus, most are junior level or higher, subtracting a portion from the millions.

So, what does this mean? Despite our current foreign relations problems and the negative shadow that hangs over our country in the eyes of many outsiders, coeds are still making the jump overseas.

You may think, "it's too early to be thinking about junior year," but honestly it's not.

I understood from the very beginning the value of studying in a foreign country. I knew as a freshman that two years from then I would be packing my bags and saying, "hasta la vista, America," and "hola, Madrid."

Knowing that was reflected in the decisions I would make course-wise and job-wise for the next two years, and it paid off.

OK, so you've gotten through my initial spiel. Now, I'd love to give you my tips on how to make one of life's greatest opportunities realistic for you!

Take More Now

Why did it pay off? These days, it is almost necessary to decide early on that you will study abroad, both from a financial standpoint and regarding college credit. You have to be living under a rock to not know that the dollar is weak. Therefore, unless you have parents who are willing to fund your travels, saving up is mandatory.

Another thing that you have to consider is your course load. The required amount of credits necessary for graduating is generally around 120. Of this 120, typically 30 go toward your major and another 65 or so are required core classes. That leaves roughly 20 "free" classes. Perfect. That's a semester-worth of throwaways to be used in Italy or Australia right? Wrong.

I'll tell you something now that you will learn very fast. When you're first starting college and Bio 101 and Stats is kicking your high school-level booty, a self-defense class seems pretty awesome. That automatic A does a little number for the GPA as well.

Slowly but surely those 20 free credits start disappearing, until wait, you want to spend the spring semester of your junior year in Prague, but the admissions office says you still have to take Introduction to Sociology.

Andrew Van Benschoten,



Contributed photo

Marissa Broe 'holds up' the Leaning Tower of Pisa in Italy during a spring break trip during her spring semester study abroad program in Spain.

a study abroad adviser at the State University College at Oneonta, supported my advice of planning ahead.

"It is important that students tell their academic advisers early on that they have an interest in studying abroad," Benschoten said in an e-mail. "They can plan their course schedule to accommodate this."

Opportunities to study abroad for SUCO students range from three home-college exchanges with universities in Japan, Sweden or Russia to faculty-led courses in places such as Costa Rica, Ghana and Italy. If students still aren't satisfied, there are 434 programs in 50 host countries available through other SUNY schools.

While Benschoten said numbers are low — 126 Oneon-

ta students studied abroad from summer 2006 to spring 2007 — in comparison to other SUNY schools, the participation is increasing.

The neighbors down the road at Hartwick College take no small measures to ensure students myriad opportunities to study abroad.

Jenifer Chambers is the director of international programs and The Center for Interdependence at Hartwick College.

Hartwick has its ever-popular January Term, or as it is better known by students, J-term. Of the roughly 1,480 students enrolled at the college last year, 287 went off-campus and about 250 went overseas to study abroad, Chambers said.

This large amount, a whopping 80 percent, earned the institution a No. 9 ranking by

US News & World Report for students studying abroad.

Chambers explained how Hartwick students avoid credit issues when they wish to study off-campus.

"Students often take the same courses abroad they would take if they were here," Chambers said in an e-mail. "In that case, they transfer back all the credit and move ahead, just as if they had stayed on campus. In other cases, they use the opportunity to take courses we do not have."

No Excuses

So what is still holding you back? It always irks me to hear friends say they didn't go abroad because of the money. Well, let me tell you. I am not made of millions, and I still managed to spend four months traveling and living in Europe. It all comes back to this idea of planning ahead.

Summers are for making money, so get out there and start working! You'll forget about that grease you had to mop off the restaurant floor when you are drinking sangria in Plaza Mayor.

Can't find a job or feeling pressured to do an unpaid internship? Look online. Sites such as Fastweb and Study-AbroadFunding are booming with scholarships and grants to make sure this experience is at least a possibility for anyone.

If you don't believe me, maybe you'll believe someone who makes a living in this field.

"I want to stress that study abroad is affordable for all students and no one should forgo it because of financial considerations," Benschoten said. "There are programs out there that are almost as inexpensive as studying at (SUCO) and financial aid applies."

So here are my last pearls of wisdom. Stick by your decisions and you'll never have regrets. Have faith that everything happens for a reason. Last, but not least, have lots of fun, but always remember to work as much as you play.

Marissa Broe, a 2005 graduate of Oneonta High School, is entering her senior year at Syracuse University, majoring in magazine journalism.