

Major Challenges and Critical Tips for Study Abroad – A Word to Students and Parents

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Having been a Dean of Admissions and an Associate Dean for Enrollment Management, my 28 years in full-time higher education included evaluating and making final decisions on over 125,000 undergraduate and graduate school applications. Based on that experience, I would like to offer an insider's view of the process of pursuing undergraduate and graduate study abroad.

Before we begin, I would like to say a brief word about the impact of COVID-19 on higher education. While the 2019-2020, 2020-2021, and 2021-2022 academic years were extremely difficult, things are slowly but surely returning to normal in terms of full in-person instruction and a full student experience, both inside and outside of the classroom. Barring an unforeseen resurgence of the pandemic, starting with the 2022-2023 academic years, students should be able to pursue study abroad very much like they did pre-COVID. Campuses are generally safe once again, and institutions are ready to welcome international students to their communities.

I. A Word to Students and A Word to Parents

A. To Students

There are three major challenges facing most international students pursuing undergraduate and/or graduate study abroad. The first is demonstrating proficiency in a language other than one's native tongue. The second is financing their education. The third is securing a student visa. Assistance with these challenges is typically provided by various higher education institutions and organizations.

Having had the privilege of working with international students over the past 42 years, I would like to share some

tips that could make a huge difference in whether your bachelor's, master's or doctoral student experience is positive or negative.

Tip One: Do not place so much emphasis on the ranking and prestige institutions. During my years in the field of enrollment management, it was extremely disheartening to witness the excessively high level of attention given to rankings/prestige. In extreme cases, this was the only criterion used to determine where to apply. As a Dean of Students it was my unfortunate experience to sit across the desk from many a student (both international and domestic) who was very unhappy with their choice of graduate institution. But they were already enrolled and felt they would lose too much if they withdrew. When asked what contributed to their decision to apply and enroll at that institution, the answer in many instances was, "It is very highly ranked."

My intention here is not to discredit rankings. They do serve a purpose. But they should never be used as the sole or primary determinant of where to apply or enroll. At best they should be part of a very long list of items used to determine what institutions/programs are the best matches for you.

In the final analysis, your success in life is not dependent on the ranking or prestige of your graduate institution. It is dependent on your level of persistence and determination, and also, on your genuine demonstration of the "Three C's:" Character, Credibility, and Communication. If you are going to focus on something, that is it.

Tip Two: My second piece of advice is that this is YOUR life, your education, your journey, and no one else's. While you have obligations to others, the first person to whom you owe allegiance is you. Be careful that you do not place too much emphasis on pleasing others, and in the process, forget yourself.

Tip Three: My final piece of advice is to make sure to allow enough time to prepare your applications. There will be a lot to do, including preparation for language proficiency tests, various undergraduate or graduate standardized tests, getting application materials and deadlines in order, preparing transcripts, essays and letters of recommendation, and much more. This all takes time. Rushing things will cause undue stress, and will also increase the chances of making unnecessary mistakes. In Chapter 1 of my book I suggest that you start your college/graduate school research process a full 12 months before applying. In some cases you may want to take even longer. Bottom line: Take the time you need to adequately prepare. You will not be sorry you did.

B. To Parents

First, let me congratulate and encourage you. It is quite an adjustment for you to have a son or daughter travel not only far away for their education, but also to another country. In some cases you may not be able to see them for one or more years. This cannot be easy for you, yet you are doing your best to support and encourage your daughter/son to pursue their educational and career goals. That is quite commendable.

As a Dean of Admissions and a Dean of Students, it was my privilege to speak with the parents of many international students, be that via phone, online, or in person. What always amazed me was the strong desire these parents had/have to see their child succeed. In many cases parents make huge sacrifices so that their children can study abroad. It was very heart warming to observe this, and to witness the strong ties between family members.

If asked to provide advice to the parents of international students, the following major tips come to mind:

Tip One: To the best of your ability, give your son or daughter permission to make some mistakes along the

way. Do not expect perfection from her/him. Any successful person has some detours along the way, and does not do everything perfectly. Yet at times parents can place quite a bit of pressure on their children to get straight A's, get the top job offer, and not fail in any way whatsoever. While you want your child to succeed, do not place too much pressure on him or her to do so. This could actually make things worse. Let your son/daughter be human. Do not place unreasonable expectations on them.

In one meeting with an international student it was related to me that her parents told her not to come back home unless she finished her degree. Unfortunately, this student was having academic difficulties and was faced with being placed on probation, perhaps worse. This in and of itself would be a major challenge for any hard-working graduate student. However, to have the pressure of not being welcomed home unless she graduated hanging over her head served only to *lessen* her ability to focus on what needed to be done to improve in her course of study. Thankfully, we were able to help her transfer to another institution.

Be supportive of your children. But remember that sometimes our greatest learning opportunities come from mistake and error. If we are afraid of or forbid failure, we actually create a culture where it is more likely that failure will occur. That is because the person who is being pressured to be perfect focuses on not making a mistake, which only causes more mistakes to be made.

To summarize, focus on *success* with your children, not on perfection. There is a huge difference between the two.

Tip Two: Help and encourage your son/daughter to find the best institution/program for *them*. Do not encourage an unhealthy and obsessive emphasis on rankings and prestige. Success in life is never dependent on where one attended college or graduate school. How many examples do we see, in any

country, of very well connected individuals who attended all the best colleges and universities, yet who have failed miserably. And conversely, how many times do we witness instances of the major success of individuals who attended institutions that were not highly ranked or very prestigious. This is a testament to the fact that it is the *individual* who determines ultimate success or failure, not the ranking or prestige of the institution s/he attends.

In some cases parents are more focused on rankings/prestige than on their children. Please do not make the mistake of assuming that where your daughter/son attends will make a huge difference down the road. It may initially open a few more doors, but that is all.

II. Seven General Tips for Completing Applications

1. RELAX!!

Do your best to relax as you work on your applications. Worrying and obsessing, while tempting, will not help. In fact, worrying and obsessing could hinder your ability to think clearly and focus on doing your best.

In truth, going through the application process can result in a major learning experience. As you complete each application you will engage in personal reflection and self discovery. This can prove to be very rewarding, whatever the decisions you receive from the admissions committee.

Use the application process to your benefit; consider it a positive learning experience in and of itself. Be calm. Be reflective. Be thoughtful. Relax.

2. Allow time.

Allocate plenty of time to complete your applications, which also and automatically helps you to relax. Rushing almost always sets you up to make mistakes.

Knowing you have adequate time is very calming and, as I mentioned earlier, allows you to focus on the task at hand - doing your best on your applications.

3. Follow directions.

This seems like such a “no-brainer” that you may wonder why I even mention it. I do so because over the years I have truly been amazed at the number of applicants who do not follow directions. If you become one of those applicants, it raises some questions about how well you will follow policies and procedures once admitted and enrolled. Some requirements may not make sense to you, but they have been provided for a reason, and you need to comply. If you are unable or unwilling to do so, you send a clear signal about yourself to the admissions committee. It is a red flag, not a green light. Let me give you a few examples:

- a. If there is a word limit for essay questions, *follow it*. Remember, application evaluators are reading hundreds, maybe thousands of essays. You will not garner a positive response if yours is longer than it is supposed to be.
- b. If you are asked for two letters of recommendation, do not send ten. Some institutions will permit one additional recommendation, but no more. Honor that.
- c. If an interview is conducted by invitation only, do not request one. You might mention that you hope you will have the opportunity to interview, but leave it there.
- d. If an interview is highly recommended, by all means request one, and make every possible effort to follow through. More about this in the next section of this chapter.
- e. If you are required to take a test to measure your English language skills, do so. Do not argue even if you are fluent in English. If that is the case you will obviously do very well on the test, which will serve to enhance your application.
- f. Do not knowingly leave a section unanswered. For example, make sure you have fully and completely addressed all essay topics/questions.
- g. Be careful about sending extra materials. Some applications allow for this, i.e., you are given the opportunity to submit an additional essay question. But if they do not, ask for permission to send additional information rather than assuming that it is appropriate to do so.

4. Be professional at all times/in all dealings.

Remember, as an applicant you are at the part of the process where you are *no longer* in the driver’s seat. You are one of many

applicants being evaluated and compared with each other. Always present yourself in a calm, assertive and sincere manner. It is appropriate to be inquisitive about your application, but it is never to your advantage to be argumentative. Be confident but not arrogant; be kind and patient, not abrasive and demanding.

Many admissions professionals keep written records of their interactions with applicants. At one university where I was employed we used something called the “orange sheet.” If we had an extremely positive or extremely negative encounter with an applicant we wrote a summary of that interaction on an orange sheet of paper and placed the sheet just inside the person’s application. When it came time to make a decision on that application, the orange sheet(s) was/were very persuasive, for better or worse.

Actions speak louder than words. Some of the best applications on paper have been completely devalued due to the behavior of the individual who prepared them.

5. Content and presentation are both important.

While what you say in your application is obviously very important, so is the “look and feel” of your application. This is especially true when the institution/program to which you are applying is extremely selective and has the luxury of admitting students from a very large applicant pool. Occasionally essay questions are not sent to the right institution, and often it is clear that they were not proofread for correct grammar or spelling. Pages are out of order. Some information is not provided, or contradicts similar information provided elsewhere in the application. Applications with these kinds of presentation errors quickly become less competitive. The admissions committee tends to assume that the applicant is not really serious about their program, and they tend to respond in a similar manner.

6. Be yourself/human/honest.

Resist the temptation to lie, embellish or make excuses. Resist the temptation to be someone you’re not. At times, applicants try to make themselves look perfect. As we all know, no one is perfect. Trying to look that way can often cause application evaluators to be more suspicious than impressed. I am not suggesting that you discuss all of your weaknesses and past mistakes, but rather, that you simply be yourself. The best applications I have read are from those who

were, in effect, communicating the following between the lines:
“This is me. I hope you will appreciate who I am, and also appreciate the level of interest I’ve demonstrated in your institution by completing this application. If you choose to admit me, I’ll be thrilled. If you don’t, I will be okay.”

Above all, do not lie or embellish. This can have disastrous effects. In my years as an application evaluator and decision maker, I have seen individuals with great talent and potential be denied admission, have their admission revoked, or be expelled after enrolling because they lied and/or embellished. If you earned a 3.2 overall GPA, do not say it was a 3.5. If you did not serve as a class officer or student leader, do not say you did. If you were not in an organization, the military, and/or the Peace Corps, do not put it on your resume. Do not write your own letters of recommendation and falsify the names of their authors. Do not pretend you are someone else when an admissions representative calls to speak with you. That one probably sounds a bit strange. Let me explain. When working as Dean of Admissions at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, I would personally phone each admitted MBA student before she/he received notification online. Obviously, it was a win-win phone call all the way around. I often made admitted student calls on the weekends to help spread out the number of contacts I made each day. I tended not to identify myself immediately, but did so as soon as the person on the phone indicated that they were indeed the applicant. One Saturday morning I called a newly admitted student. The gentleman who answered the phone claimed he was not the applicant. I was sure I had dialed the correct phone number, so I tried the number again a few minutes later. This time a woman answered the phone. I identified myself and asked if the applicant was there. The same gentleman, who had just answered my call a few minutes earlier, took the phone. When I asked why he lied to me about his identity, he said he thought I was making a “sales call.” Upon hearing this, I informed the applicant that while the original purpose of my call was to congratulate him on his admission, I was now informing him that he was denied.

That story could be repeated more times than I care to remember. Dishonesty is such a waste – there is absolutely no need for it. Many admissions evaluators randomly screen applicants and verify information they have provided. While it is human to be tempted, do

not allow yourself to yield. There is nothing to be gained, whether you are found out or not.

Finally, do not make excuses on your application. You may decide that you need to explain a lower overall GPA, a less than stellar academic record during one of the years you were in college, a break in your employment record, holding several jobs in a short period of time, etc. If there are legitimate reasons for what might seem like a blemish in your application, by all means let the admissions committee know. Perhaps you had a serious illness, lost a loved one, experienced a sudden financial crisis, etc. That should definitely be mentioned. Bottom line, make explanations, not excuses. The admissions committee will know the difference and your application will either be helped or hindered.

7. Make contingency plans in case you are not admitted.

In the end, things happen for a reason. In my years as an admissions dean I met applicants who were so convinced that a particular institution was for them that they did not make plans for what to do if things did not go as they hoped. Some would go so far as to inform employers and loved ones of their plans before it was advisable to do so. In some very extreme cases they moved to where their number one option was located before they received a decision on their application!

Being confident and positive is one thing. Throwing caution to the wind is another. Be prepared to be denied, perhaps to every one of your options, or to be placed on the waiting list by several of your options.

Being prepared for all outcomes is not a sign of lack of belief in yourself or your ability to do graduate work. Rather, it is a sign that you realize life does not always go the way we plan, and making alternative plans is often required.

III. The Mind of the American Admissions Director/
Committee/Faculty Evaluator*

On many occasions it was my privilege to attend conferences with other admissions and enrollment professionals. During these events we would have an opportunity to discuss our approaches to evaluating

applications, and of course, that included applications submitted by international students. Here are some ideas about what is going through the mind of someone who is evaluating and/or making a final decision on an application submitted by a citizen of another country:

1. The first thing on the mind of the admissions director is meeting the enrollment goals of the institution. Often times these goals are set without the input of the admissions director. They are most often set by the senior administration, and in lesser instances by the faculty. It is rare that the admissions director has input in the setting of these goals, yet s/he is responsible for reaching them. Many factors are considered in the determination of enrollment goals – the number of men, the number of women, the number of U.S. minority students, the number of international students, average GPA, average for standardized tests, and more. While the enrollment goals may not always seem understandable from a strictly objective point of view, there are usually sound reasons for each and every one of them. There will almost always be an international student enrollment target number provided to the director. Sometimes this number will be flexible; most of the time it is set in stone. Let's say, for instance, that the enrollment goal for incoming international students at the institution is 20%, and the overall incoming class size goal is 450. That means the director will be responsible for the enrollment of 90 international students at the start of the academic year. If that number is 80 or lower, or 100 or higher, the administration will most likely not be happy. And let's say that between 500 and 600 international students make application for that incoming target of 90. This means a very difficult selection process for that director. S/he will most likely have to deny

many more than can be admitted. But keep in mind that this is not the director's prerogative. She or he is simply following the directives of those at higher levels of the administration.

2. Among directors of admission and faculty there is a generally positive impression of international applicants. They are seen as being extremely motivated, committed, hard working and flexible. This impression was and is certainly my own. International students consider studying abroad to be a real privilege and they are committed to making the most of that opportunity.
3. There is also a general impression that international students will make every effort to become part of the educational environment they join. The perception is that international students take great pains to "fit in," make friends, and become part of the institutional "family."
4. In most cases it is assumed that international students complete good applications, and that they are able to follow directions well. This is extremely important. In the mind of an admissions committee member and/or the admissions director, someone who cannot follow directions as an applicant will be less likely to follow directions as a student.
5. The only real concern on the part of most admissions directors has to do with the ability of the international applicants being evaluated to communicate in English. Obviously, this is critical to success in completing the graduate degree. Insufficient English proficiency results in challenges for the student, his/her classmates (especially with group work/projects) and faculty. Sometimes international students view English requirements at various institutions as prohibitive or even punitive. This could not be further from the truth. It is actually a step taken

to help guarantee their success. Admissions, student affairs, and academic personnel are extremely concerned about creating an environment in which their students will thrive. After all, satisfied alumni are what give an institution its greatest level of credibility. The last thing anyone would want is for a student to come to the United States for their education and fail, especially if that can be prevented. Determining the level of English proficiency is critical to an international student's application.

* = For most doctoral programs, faculty members are very involved in the evaluation of applicants. In many instances they make the final decision on admission.

IV. A Few Words About Finances

One of the major misperceptions held by a large number of international students is that once admitted, their institution will fully or largely fund them. This is often not the case. Most institutions offer financial aid, but these resources have to be divided among well deserving students in the entire incoming class. It was my experience at each of my employing institutions that we never had enough funding to assist everyone we wanted to help. Educational costs increase every year, and in many cases the percentage of tuition increase is higher than the percentage of financial aid increase. This means that those making financial aid decisions may actually be working with less in determining who will receive financial help. It is a known fact that international students are eligible for far fewer loans than their U.S. classmates. This has resulted in inquiries about why international students do not receive larger amounts of scholarship assistance than U.S. citizens. While this seems like a fair question, let's look at the implications of what is being suggested: Should a practice of this kind be implemented, it would mean that U.S. students who have worked just as hard and

whose credentials are just as strong would not benefit from scholarship assistance – instead, they would be asked to rely largely on loans. My practice when making financial aid awards, and that of most U.S institutions, was/is that all admitted students should be eligible for scholarship help. But in addition, while employed at The University of Chicago and Columbia University, we did secure some loan funding for international students. Other institutions have made similar attempts to help international students fund their education in the U.S. However, my sense is that there will always be less in loan dollars for international students studying in another country.

But do not despair. There are many opportunities for financial assistance to international students, including:

****Employment at the Institution.** Most international students are not permitted to have full or part-time employment positions in the United States. However, many are able to secure employment where they are earning their degree. This allows for a steady income, and in many cases, a reduction in tuition. Upon being admitted it is wise to check on this option right away. It could be that you would be able to secure a position for the entire length of your academic program.

****Scholarships.** Unlike fellowships and assistantships, scholarships are usually awarded for only one year. As with fellowships, they do not require any services from the recipient. But unlike fellowships and assistantships, they are most always used to cover tuition and do not include living expenses. Scholarship amounts vary, from very large awards to an award that could be as low as \$500.

****Loans.** It may be possible to secure a loan at some institutions. Loans for international students usually have very reasonable repayment terms, but may require a co-signer who is a U.S citizen or permanent resident. This will always be the case if the amount of the loan is high according to the lender's definition.

**Fellowships or Assistantships (typically only at the graduate level). The first thing to remember about fellowships and assistantships is that they are often renewable. This means that it is possible to receive a fellowship or assistantship for more than one year, provided the recipient does very well academically. Fellowships are reserved for the most highly competitive entering students, and are used as a means of persuading these students to enroll. A fellowship usually covers a portion of tuition, and may also include some help for living expenses. In addition, the student receiving a fellowship does not normally have to provide any services to the institution in return. Due to the fairly large sums of money they provide, fellowships are usually few in number.

Assistantships are like fellowships, but usually with one exception: The recipient works in some capacity to receive the money contained in the assistantship. Most often assistantships entail working with a professor in some way. It may be that the recipient would assist the professor with his/her research, help to teach a class, or provide other help. Assistantship awards are usually not as large as fellowship awards, and therefore, there are more of them.

**Assistance from your home country. It is wise to inquire about overseas funding opportunities made available at the local, regional or national level. Many countries support foreign study, and to that end, provide assistance for graduate students earning their degrees abroad. Keep in mind, however, that this assistance may include a requirement that the student move back home immediately upon graduation and find employment there. In some cases, the organization/entity providing the funding may offer the recipient a job upon completion of study.

**Assistance from future employers. In two major employment fields, business and law, prospective

employers will offer starting bonuses that might include as much as full tuition, provided that the student remain with the company/firm for a specified period of time once employed. Starting bonuses of this kind are sometimes offered in other fields. In many instances, starting bonuses are not tied with tuition. They are offered as a means of persuading the individual to accept an employment offer.

In closing, let me re-emphasize what was stated at the beginning of this section: *Plan ahead financially for your education*. Yes, there will most likely be some financial aid opportunities for you from the institution to which you are admitted, or from a future employer. But these will not cover everything. You would be well advised to have as much as possible of your own funds set aside before you enroll

**One excellent resource for educational in the USA is the EducationUSA program, which operates over 450 advising centers worldwide. The web address for EducationUSA is www.educationusa.state.gov.

About Dr. Donald C. Martin:

- Spent 28 years in graduate enrollment and student services; evaluated over 125,000 applications between 1980 and 2004
- Was Dean of Admissions/Financial Aid and Dean of Students at Columbia University (Teachers College), The University of Chicago (Booth School of Business), Northwestern University (Medill School of Journalism), and Wheaton College (IL)
- Founded Grad School Road Map in July 2008
- Wrote and published Road Map for Graduate Study: A Guide for Prospective Graduate Students in 2008 (2nd edition released in July 2018)
- Former weekly columnist, US News & World Report Magazine
- Former monthly contributor for CollegeXPress
- Former contributor for SPAN magazine in India

- Has made graduate school presentations on over 50 college/university campuses in North America, Europe and Asia; Speaks at educational and graduate school conferences, fairs and workshops across the US, Europe, Asia and Latin America
- Has coached over 600 applicants worldwide (97% acceptance rate and over \$16 million in funding)