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Unpacking Your Life-Changing Study Abroad Experience *La Vie Collegienne*

Studying abroad can be a life-changing experience, if you let it.

Being abroad will test your comfort zone, push your emotional boundaries, and open you up to experiences that you never knew existed. That is a lot to deal with on your own, both emotionally and physically. Luckily, there is a new program on campus that aids future study abroad students through their future endeavors.

Three years ago both the Career Services and Study Abroad offices came together to develop a program for students that would act as an aid for developing their new found experiences into marketable traits.

From that idea they expanded the program into an “Unpacking Your Study Abroad Experience” workshop which has become popular among students in recent years.

From this successful workshop the two offices came together yet again to form another, more involved, program that would not only help students after their experience, both before and during it as well.

The new program is called the “Expanding the Journey” because that is what the five-step program is intended to do. It allows students to not only get the experience during the time they are abroad, but it also aims to target the emotional development that a student experiences in studying abroad.

There are five parts to this new program that are vital for students to get everything they possibly can out of their abroad experience. The program begins with a mandatory pre-departure orientation that involves each participant taking an “Intercultural Inventory IQ Quiz.” The quiz is intended as a comparison aid to be used later in the program.

Next, there is a goal-setting workshop that is an informal, interactive meeting to discuss student goals during their time abroad. Each student gets a study abroad workbook that they can log these goals in for themselves. These exercises are not graded or handed in, they are solely for the students benefit to help them develop goals and reflect upon themselves after their time abroad.

The third part of the program occurs during student’s time abroad. Jill Russell, Director of Study Abroad, will send each student a self-reflective prompt that will help the student to view how they are adapting and to see how they have grown since they have left LVC.

“When students ask themselves what they want out of the whole experience sometimes the act of writing it down can help to solidify a goal,” explained Associate Career Services Director Gwen Miller. She said one of the reasons for these exercises is to get the students thinking about themselves and how they are going through major changes in culture, lifestyle, and surroundings in general.

The fourth step is the “Unpacking Study Abroad” workshop. Its purpose is to chronicle the student’s experience onto resumes aimed at giving students a competitive edge.

“The whole session is about how to articulate your experience to make it matter to someone else” Miller explained. She feels that this new five-step program will allow students to realize all of the changes that they have been through throughout the whole study abroad experience.

One of the reasons that this program is being put into place is so that students can take their self-reflection work and articulate the skills acquired overseas into traits that they can use to market themselves in future workplaces. These traits will translate into a list of character strengths that employers and/or graduate schools will want prospective students to possess.

The final step to the Expanding the Journey Program is for each student to write a self-reflection piece on their experience. This highly encouraged step is one that the Study Abroad Office and the Career Services Office feel will help each student look back at their progress and help to develop some closure on the experience.

Russell said this fifth step is important because “initially when a student comes back from being abroad for a certain amount of time they need to immerse themselves back into this culture and we hope that this step will help them to do that.”

With the implementation of this new program, it is becoming increasingly easier to allow yourself to have a positive and fulfilled study abroad experience.