



Association of International Education Administrators
Leaders in International Higher Education

Rendezvous with the World

Stephen J. Friedman, President
Pace University

In his latest book, “The Greater Journey,” historian David McCullough chronicles the profound impact that time spent in Paris had on many of America’s most creative young minds in the 19th century. Aspiring doctors, lawyers, writers, and painters, these intrepid travelers did not have the advantage of a formal study abroad program, but they were students through and through, immersing themselves in French culture and delving deeply into their chosen fields. Most had never before left the shores of the United States but, like many students today, they instinctively grasped that they would never reach their potential if they failed to keep their rendezvous with the world.

“The thought of going abroad makes my heart leap,” wrote Charles Sumner, whose experience working alongside black students at the Sorbonne helped transform him into the leading anti-slavery voice of the United States Senate. “A stay abroad of any length does one a world of good,” wrote a Pace University student more than 150 years later in a blog chronicling his adventures in the Semester at Sea Program. “Everything changes depending on your perspective, and being able to see things from different viewpoints is key to becoming a better person.”

Today, the joy and excitement of setting off for the unknown remains. As most young people will tell you, it is a moment of unparalleled exhilaration and anticipation. That yearning for discovery and adventure is woven into the very fabric of the human spirit, and it is incumbent on universities to nurture and develop that spirit in all of their students.

By any measure, traveling abroad and learning to see things through the eyes of those from very different cultures is a valuable experience. For many students at urban or regional universities it also provides an instant broadening of the range of possibilities for their own lives. For a student whose experience has been confined to New York City or Westchester, a semester spent in England or China or South Africa can transform his or her sense of self and the scope of his or her future. Sometimes even a week or two of intense experience in a foreign culture can produce palpable changes in young people as they realize that they can function happily and effectively in a much bigger world.

Like their 19th century counterparts, today’s students eagerly embrace an international experience that places less emphasis on the traditional classroom environment and more on a vigorous intellectual and emotional engagement with people and customs. For students with

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limited travel experience, working with international peers on common problems can reveal both startling differences in culture and communication and startling similarities. Students from a city like New York, where people thrive on the energy and creativity generated by open argument, learn to work with those who are brought up in cultures that abhor it. They learn that two people can look at the same set of facts or historical events and draw very different conclusions about what happened and why, and who was right and who was wrong. They also come face to face with the limits of their own understanding. These are challenging experiences, but ones from which students emerge with new skills, new ways of thinking, and a new confidence that they can succeed in any environment.

This challenge provides an added dimension for the high performing students at urban and regional universities. They are very often the intellectual equals of their peers at any university but have not had the same financial or experiential advantages. They come to college eager to test themselves against the very best. They thrive on inquiry and hard work. And they desire, above all, to know what they do not know—not just about a particular subject but about other people and their points of view. These students exemplify a university at its very best, and we are proud that they represent our institution and our nation around the globe.

These experiences inform the graduate school experience as well. Our Law School is a sponsor of an international moot competition in Vienna each year that draws teams from across Europe, Asia and the Americas. When students on the U.S. teams find themselves competing in English with students from more than 50 countries, all addressing the same issues, it is an eye-opening experience. Most come away with a firm sense that there is no reason why they cannot have a career in international commercial law.

At Pace, a university that educates its students to become thinking professionals, spirited engagement with the world represents one of our core values and infuses teaching and learning across our programs. Today, technology is providing virtual pathways to foster international engagement. For example, Pace Professor of Computer Science Christelle Scharff teaches a computer engineering course in which teams of students at universities located in four cities around the globe — New York, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Delhi, India, and Dakar, Senegal — work together on a common project to develop mobile technology solutions aimed at improving the quality of life in urban environments. This virtual foreign experience offers not a replacement but a robust addition to traditional study abroad programs — freeing it from the confines of a single year or semester and making it part of the everyday learning environment.

The presence of 1,300 international students on the Pace campuses provides a further means of international cultural engagement, enhancing the social and intellectual diversity of urban and regional university communities, and giving young people from around the world the

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opportunity to develop friendships that last a lifetime. While foreign students receive the advantage of an American education, they give their peers and professors the opportunity to contemplate, both inside and outside the classroom, perspectives and experiences very different from their own. This, too, is a vital and fundamental part of the educational process. People, young and old, believe the world is what they believe it to be because that is all they know — until they know better.

Whether traveling to Paris, as many students still do, sailing to more exotic outposts, participating in a virtual international experience or engaging with foreign students at Pace in New York or Westchester, the greater journey for most college students remains the internal one. Study abroad and engagement with foreign peers dissolves the borders - not just between countries but those in a young person's mind that constrain what he or she assumes is possible for them in this world. I cannot think of a better preparation for life and leadership today.

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