

# **The Value of Study Away in NYU's Global Network**

## **Introduction**

New York University transformed itself from a local commuter school to a global network over the course of just three short decades. During that same period, and for reasons involving far more than the growth of study away sites and portal campuses, NYU became a leading research university with stellar faculty, as well as one of the most popular choices for applicants to college.

The global network has now reached a level of operational and pedagogical maturity that allows the NYU faculty to take time to reflect, and to ask a set of important questions that could not be sufficiently addressed during the hectic period of the global network's rapid growth. What is the academic value of study away for NYU students? How can this complex set of sites and portals facilitate faculty and student research? What is the global network for?

These are questions that we hope will guide conversations about the global network at every level: on the wide variety of faculty committees devoted to things global (the Site-Specific Advisory Committees, the Faculty Committee on the Global Network, the Global Subcommittees of the Faculty Senates), within the leadership of the Office of Global Programs and the Provost's Office, and, most important, among the faculty throughout the global network.

Particularly valuable work was performed during the last academic year by the Faculty Working Group on Global Learning Objectives (GLO), which issued its report in the summer of 2017. The GLO Working Group detailed the outcomes and attitudes that should ideally result from the study away experience, including a set of objectives and recommendations that should prove useful for the ongoing development and refinement of global programs.

In my capacity as Senior Academic Convenor for the Global Network (and member of the GLO Working Group), and after consultation with a number of colleagues within the faculty and the Office of Global Programs, I have attempted to synthesize the work of the GLO and the input of my colleagues in order to go beyond learning objectives and articulate the broader value of study away for our students. My intention is to tease out principles that I believe are inherent in global programs currently, but have not always been put into words. This document is not meant to be a statement of policy, but rather a springboard for faculty discussion.

## **Educational Philosophy**

As NYU has increasingly been associated with global study in the minds of our potential students (not to mention in the university's publicity materials), it is appropriate to start with our identity as an institution. We are a research university that provides a liberal arts education to the majority of our undergraduates while also fostering intellectual

curiosity and breadth among the students in our professional schools. NYU, like the city that birthed it, is antithetical to narrowness of perspective. Though connected by bridges and tunnels, both the city and the University must be the enemy of tunnel vision.

A truly great undergraduate education cannot be parochial. The global network's emphasis on connectivity mirrors our academic priorities, framing often minute or specialized areas of knowledge within a broader curriculum that implicitly responded to E.M. Forster's famous dictum, "Only connect." Conceived during a time when the word "global" was in the height of intellectual fashion, the global network is all the more important in the current isolationist climate, when borders are thought to be protective ramparts rather than obstacles to the free exchange of ideas.

The challenges and benefits of study away are based on the delicate balance between consistency and discovery. On the one hand, it is essential that the quality of instruction be on a level comparable to the level found on the student's home campus, and the student's degree progress must not be impeded by spending a semester at a different location. On the other hand, the entire experience would be pointless if study away failed to take advantage of the local and the "foreign" as an invaluable opportunity to engage with difference. At its best, study away as practiced by NYU fosters and leverages creative disruption, forging intellectual communities out of students from diverse backgrounds and pursuing a variety of courses of study, encouraging an interdisciplinary and cross-culture approach to research questions, and challenging assumptions that might be left unquestioned if one never ventured outside of familiar territory.

Study away is (or should be) the geographic expression of the core values of the liberal arts: though most of our students will eventually take up a specific profession, they are educated to become critically acute, intellectually versatile thinkers whose intellectual curiosity and cross-cultural competency are among the crucial tools for analyzing new information and adapting to changing circumstances.

### **Utility vs Value**

If there is a question about the value of study away, the answer cannot be simply a matter of academic disciplines. While in some cases it is quite possible, and even likely, that the partnership between a site and a particular academic program will provide a qualitative, intellectual contribution to the student's primary area of study, the value is broader than that.

For liberal arts students, that value should be clear: this is not pre-professional training. We are educating flexible, intellectual young adults who must acquire the habit of examining questions through multiple perspectives. Our pedagogical principles cannot be reduced to the simple "transmission of knowledge;" rather, an undergraduate education is the process in which students learn how to evaluate not just information, but the very processes through which knowledge is disseminated, replicated, and challenged. Study away adds a level of productive estrangement, obliging students to question their assumptions and see a different world around them.

Study away, like the liberal arts, can be championed by two seemingly-contradictory arguments that actually work together.

On the one hand, we value both not because of their utility, but precisely because they are “use-less”: study away does not necessarily map well onto a set of specific goals for the students, because part of the value lies in the opening of unexpected intellectual passions and experiences rather than foreclosing possibilities.

On the other hand, it is this very open-endedness that prepares NYU’s graduates for a postindustrial information economy. All the clichés of professional development (“thinking outside the box”) are best fostered by a maximally open approach to education. Moreover, living outside one’s home country has been shown to increase adaptability and flexibility in the face of challenge.

### **Small Colleges and Large Universities**

Studying at a large research university involves obvious trade-offs: students are taught by some of the top scholars in their fields, but, in some of NYU’s constituent schools, they often find themselves in large classrooms that, despite the instructors’ best efforts, can feel impersonal. The larger schools in New York have developed a variety of strategies to mitigate this problem (the freshmen seminars in CAS, for example), but the scale of New York University makes this an uphill battle.

Study at NYU’s global sites provides an academic experience more closely resembling that of a small, more intimate college. Even students in the most popular majors have the opportunity to learn in groups of 20 or less in virtually all their classes. The global site also brings together students from all NYU’s colleges and campuses, promoting exchanges of viewpoint (not to mention friendships) that rarely happen in many home campus classrooms.

For students at NYU Abu Dhabi and NYU Shanghai, the benefits of size and scale are sometimes reversed. The opportunity to study at the global sites and in the other degree-granting campuses affords these students additional curricular choices, as well as access to wider peer groups that include students from across the global network.

### **Common Grounds**

Older American models of “study abroad” make assumptions that no longer hold true, starting with the makeup of the undergraduate population. While a significant number of our students may well be crossing U.S. borders for the first time, perhaps an even greater number were born elsewhere, whether they moved with their families at an early age or came to the United States specifically for college. Indeed, one possible objection to the emphasis on study away is that our campus in New York is already global. Wouldn’t international students in particular be less interested in studying away?

In fact, the data suggest that international students at NYU study away at roughly the same rate as their counterparts who have spent their entire lives in the United States, even when the disproportionately international student bodies of the Abu Dhabi and Shanghai campuses are excluded. This is consistent with what we generally see when students spend time abroad: after living in another culture once, it becomes easier (and perhaps more desirable) to do so again. But the participation of American-born and international students in the global experience suggests another benefit. When colleges put together a core curriculum, the emphasis is often on the creation of an intellectual common ground for a diverse student body. Study away does something equally valuable in providing *shared uncommon grounds*, creating that constructive dislocation as an experience common to all.<sup>1</sup>

### Tensions and Opportunities

While acknowledging the benefits of a global experience, we cannot ignore the legitimate concerns that such a complex system inevitably creates. Time in particular is a limited resource for our faculty and students, and any time a student spends away from their home campus is time that, at least theoretically, could have been devoted to working more closely with a faculty member in their major. What is lost when a student studies away, and how can that loss be mitigated?

First, we should note that this is not an issue for all our students. Many, in fact, will have *more* opportunity to work with faculty in small classes while studying away. But in a number of departments and programs, the possible disruption of a student's course of study or interruption in the faculty/student mentoring process is a real concern. The first issue (**progress towards the major**) is a specific challenge that the Office of Global Programs, in partnership with faculty throughout the University, have worked hard to remedy through "pathway" models. Generally, the goal is for students in a participating department or program to have at least one site where they can make progress toward the degree while studying away. For some majors, this is easy to accomplish through widely popular courses and/or electives. By contrast, in the case of a highly structured major, this may mean that the department or program offers a set of specific courses tailored to their students' needs in a particular semester, at one site. If a department or program identifies a particular semester in a student's course of study to spend at a particular site, along with the specific courses students need to make progress in the major, pathways can often (though not always) allow for these courses to be offered as part of the study away semester.

The second issue (**ensuring rather than disrupting the academic ties between students and faculty in their home departments and programs**) is more abstract, and varies significantly by discipline and departmental culture. At this point, we do not have enough information on this topic, and nearly all of it is anecdotal. We welcome the opportunity to discuss this question with any faculty concerned, in order to find out the

---

<sup>1</sup> "Shared uncommon grounds" is arguably a feature that is built most profoundly into NYU's Abu Dhabi campus, where the overwhelming majority of the student population are living in a country that is not their own and no nationality makes up more than 15 percent of the student body.

extent to which this may or may not be a problem, and develop ideas to remedy it.

The third issue is the **relationship between study away and the fulfillment of general education requirements** (which vary from school to school). For example, though designed for the College of Arts and Sciences, parts of the College Core Curriculum are used by several other schools in the New York campus. The Core is meant to be a foundational experience for participating students, upon which faculty can build in their more advanced classes. Like Global Programs, the Core is a complex operation that requires a horizon of predictability for enrollments. In addition, one of the Core's points of pride is that undergraduates receive instruction from research-active faculty, which, while perceived as a guarantor of quality, has the added benefit of allowing the Core to serve as a gateway to departmental courses (students who valued a particular Core course sometimes follow their instructor to other classes, or discover an interest in the instructor's field). How do we balance students' desire for flexibility (expressed as the opportunity to take Core classes while studying away) with concerns' over the Core's possible "dilution"?

Finally, even as more and more New York, Abu Dhabi, and Shanghai faculty gain first-hand experience of the sites, **the majority of the faculty have limited knowledge (or curiosity) about their global site colleagues**. All global courses are vetted by offering departments and curriculum committees, and no instructor is hired at the sites without the approval of the department(s) sponsoring the course(s). Site faculty are selected with the approval of New York departments and are not contingent labor; very often, they are professors at local institutions who have added teaching at the sites to their portfolios because of the unique opportunity to teach NYU students. These are not underemployed PhDs cobbling together a living on a course-by-course basis. But we must recognize that the geographic distance between faculty at NYU's home campuses and their colleagues at the global sites leaves a great deal of room for suspicion and skepticism. How do we bridge this gap?

### **Value for Faculty**

When we discuss the University's global network in terms of "study away," we are talking first and foremost about students (primarily, but not exclusively, undergraduates<sup>2</sup>). There is, however, another set of ongoing conversations about faculty research opportunities, whether through the Global Research Initiatives (GRI) or via the numerous events and conferences held at the sites each year. In addition, the sites and their faculty members represent an opportunity for pedagogical innovation through collaborative projects with New York, Abu Dhabi, and Shanghai faculty, yet the mechanisms for this sort of work are in flux. These questions are beyond the scope of the current document, but we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge them here.

---

<sup>2</sup> The sites have now begun to offer great opportunities for graduate students to experience the global network. Five schools now offer degree programs that take place either in whole or in part at the sites, and two (Law and Social Work) offer semester-long study away programs for their graduate students. January and Summer Terms also see many graduate-level courses taught at the global sites.

Moreover, while this document is animated by years of conversations with and among NYU faculty, it is crucial that faculty voices continue to be heard. NYU's global programs must be guided by the educational vision of the faculty.

### **Conclusion**

As a community of scholars, we are typically comfortable with addressing questions that will always remain open. Study away in the global network will always involve a set of philosophical and pedagogical conundrums, but conundrums are an intellectual's bread and butter. At this point in the network's maturity, we as scholars and members of the NYU community have an opportunity to think through our global endeavor, rather than simply react to crisis or controversy. We have built something unprecedented. Isn't it time we discuss what we have built it for?

Eliot Borenstein  
Senior Academic Convenor for the Global Network