

WELCOMING HOME WORLD TRAVELERS



When Angela Manginelli spent the fall of 2001 studying abroad in London, she had the transformative experience touted by her university prior to departure. But then she returned to campus in Indiana. “I came back and felt like everyone was really excited for Taco Bell and sporting events,” recalls Manginelli. “I missed London—the person I was and the life I had when I was abroad.”

Today, Manginelli is the Director of Alumni Relations for AIFS Study Abroad, a provider of study abroad programs, and Vice President for Lessons From Abroad, a non-profit organization that hosts regional study abroad returnee conferences. Her first-hand experience as a returning study abroad student is part of what drives her to ensure other study abroad alumni remain engaged with their programs. “The study abroad field does a fantastic job getting students prepared to go abroad. We set expectations, present opportunities to engage with a different culture and facilitate those opportunities when the students travel,” she says. “But when we bring the students back to the U.S., we don’t necessarily give them the tools to process all of their emotions and everything they have learned.”

Heather Gregg Reed agrees. “We promise students that study abroad can change the trajectory of their personal and professional lives. If we’re going to fully lay claim to that, then we have to do our due diligence to make sure students are connecting all the pieces,” says Reed, Field Director for the Southeast and Alumni Relations Manager at the Institute for Study Abroad, Butler University (IFSA-Butler).



FOR STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS TO BE TRULY TRANSFORMATIVE, THEY NEED TO FULLY ENGAGE RETURNING STUDENTS.



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UNPACKING

THE STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE

There are several reasons why it's important to engage study abroad alumni. First, it allows students to unpack their experiences, thoughtfully considering what they have learned and how it can impact their future. Students can "close the learning loop," says Manginelli. In addition, it helps students re-acclimate to life on campus and in the United States. Without guidance, re-entry can be jarring. Finally, keeping connected to study abroad alumni is a smart marketing move for colleges: Returnees are often the best spokespeople for study abroad.



Here are six ideas from Manginelli and Reed on ways to engage study abroad alumni:

- **Offer a platform** to share experiences. Schedule a regular time and place where returning students can talk about their time abroad, discuss the challenges of returning home and connect with fellow travelers. Enlist your most impassioned alumni to champion these events and encourage others to attend.
- **Facilitate reflection activities.** Reed offers a workshop on digital storytelling, guiding students to reflect on their experiences and compile and narrate a short video that illustrates what day-to-day life is like while studying abroad from each student's unique perspective. Creating the videos not only allows the students to process their experiences, but the finished products can be posted online for promotional purposes.
- **Create an ambassador program.** Alumni can promote study abroad programs on campus through several venues. These include presenting an informational session to clubs or classes, hosting an internationally-focused event, speaking to future travelers at pre-departure orientations and organizing a panel discussion on topics such as studying abroad as a minority woman or living in a third-world country. "Prospective students listen to their peers in a different way than they will ever listen to us as professionals," says Manginelli.
- **Pair study abroad alumni** with international students. Creating a relationship between an international student from China and a study abroad alumni who spent a semester in Beijing, for example, can be mutually beneficial. "Students who have just come back from studying abroad are a lot more sensitive to what it feels like to be a fish out of water—to be lost and not understand how to use mass transit or order off a menu," says Manginelli. "And it gives the domestic student a chance to unpack or relive experiences that perhaps they didn't understand at the time." The American student can ask the international student questions and put experiences in context.
- **Promote regional returnee conferences.** Colleges with small study abroad offices and limited budgets may struggle to even organize a pizza dinner for returnees. If you are over-burdened, investigate regional returnee conferences, such as the 18 offered around the country by Lessons From Abroad. At the conferences, students meet study abroad alumni from nearby universities, learn about other opportunities to travel, practice language skills, discover how to be global citizens domestically and more.
- **Tie in professional development advice.** "Help students develop a specific message about study abroad so they can apply it to professional experiences," says Reed. "They can have an elevator pitch ready for job interviews." One school that's done this is North Carolina State University, which Reed says has developed a workshop that teaches students in the College of Management how to add study abroad experiences to their resumes and talk about international study and internships in interviews.



CLOSING THE CIRCLE

IFSA-Butler promises to offer “360 degree support” for study abroad students. Alumni support is critical to closing the circle. And while some students may be able to process their experiences independently, that’s a tall order for most 18 to 22-year-olds. “Simply interning or studying abroad does not guarantee that students will learn anything about themselves or their passions,” says Reed. “Adding the alumni engagement piece really holds us accountable.”

Peers in the study abroad industry can hold one another accountable, too. “When I started in this field eight years ago, there were no conversations happening around alumni,” says Reed. “I’m really excited that there’s a growing interest and recognition for the need to engage students at this level. And I hope we continue the conversation and keep sharing ideas so we can all make our programs more accessible and stronger.”



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