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Studying abroad lets students share global perspective

MORGANTOWN-- There's a good reason John Pino's international studies classmates haven't seen him around West Virginia University's campus lately. He's been in Mexico all semester, honing his Spanish skills and improving his Mexican pronunciation.

Pino, a junior, is one of 721 WVU students who are taking their education across borders this year through the university's growing Office of International Programs.

The office guides various programs to globalize WVU's curriculum and promote diversity and multiculturalism, but one of the key goals is sending students abroad.

Study-abroad offerings have grown steadily since WVU restructured the office in 1997 and brought it to the downtown campus.

"Once it was seen as being an interesting, exotic academic experience, said Dr. Dan Weiner, director. "Today it's been institutionalized into the academic culture."

The university refocused the program on three fronts. It encourages participation by educating advisors about how the programs work, bringing faculty into the study-abroad programs, and making the programs affordable through scholarships and grants.

"After 9/11 we were concerned that students wouldn't want to go out of fear, but it really traumatized and globalized our youth," Weiner said. "A global perspective is clearly critical to be successful."

In fact, enrollment in study-abroad programs has risen steadily since 2000, except for a dip in the 2002-2003 academic year when some programs were cancelled because of perceived risk from SARS, the respiratory illness that started in China and spread to other countries.

As in the past, Italy is the top destination for WVU, with 152 students this year. But WVU's offerings extend beyond Western Europe. Programs exist in 73 different countries from Argentina to Zimbabwe.

"I think they are realizing that it's beneficial for their futures. It makes them more competitive candidates in the workplace," said Kate Molinari, a graduate Integrated Marketing Communications student who studied in both France and England. She now works as an international programs recruiter for the university.

"I had two separate experiences, definitely," she said. "They were both unique and different, but I ultimately grew and learned a lot."

But students have more options than just where to go. They can also decide when and how.

In addition to 28 direct WVU exchanges, there are also faculty-led and affiliate programs.

These faculty programs include the popular spring break trips, where the information students have studied all semester comes alive for a week in March. This year, the trips include the Czech Republic, England, Germany, Ireland and Italy.

"They fill up almost immediately," Weiner said.

Dr. Ryan Claycomb, an assistant professor of English, leads the London Theater Tour trip over spring break. This program has been exposing students to art and culture in England for about 20 years, despite the expense of traveling in London.

The shorter trips let students stick their toes into the study-abroad pool without the cost or commitment of a full semester trip, he said. It helps them engage the material better as well.

"My sense is, this kind of trip can really open their eyes to ways the classroom isn't limited to the campus," Claycomb said. "The plays we read aren't texts in a vacuum, not ideas that don't have roots in history or culture. They can connect to the city of London or the very house where Shakespeare was born."

The class reads various texts and then sees four plays on the London theater circuit, as well as visiting sites like the Tower of London and Westminster Abby.

Study abroad tends to affect students more deeply than another line on a resume, but it can't hurt to share those international experiences with potential employers, Weiner said.

"Clearly, personal growth is a benefit. Study abroad facilitates a process of understanding who they are, psychologically and spiritually, and helps develop life skills like leadership," Weiner said.

Because semesters abroad are being built into the curriculum, they can actually help students graduate on time or even more quickly. Though affiliate programs may be steeper in price, WVU's direct exchanges usually require students to pay their regular tuition to WVU. Some grants and scholarships are available, as well.

"I believe anyone can study abroad if they were given the proper assistance in researching possible courses of study and available scholarships," Pino said.

Programs do not always go off without a hitch, however. Students do face anti-American sentiments abroad, although this has not been a major issue. WVU provides training to help them avoid risks by teaching them how to behave according to the culture they are entering.

"Our students have been good ambassadors," Weiner said.

His office requires students to be passing academically and free of any serious disciplinary problems. Occasionally, issues do occur, whether they are with depression, homesickness or substance abuse.

Weiner's office serves as a bridge between students and the school, to help with any problems, e-mail them football scores and news, and help evacuate them if there is a serious problem.

Weiner said he is excited to be in the study-abroad field, and sees great potential for WVU's program.

"Even though there are 721 people who went abroad this year, there were still 26,000 who didn't. Most students don't," Weiner said. "When they come back, they're sharing that global perspective here on campus."

As for Pino, he said he plans to study abroad again after he returns from Mexico.

With half a semester spent, he has felt the benefits of the experience.

"Let's just say that Mexicans are extremely impressed if a gringo can hold a conversation with them in Spanish," he said.