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As a college student you can take control of your life and work towards building an exciting international career in the field of your choice. Imagine working for UNESCO in Paris, on an AIDS project in Togo, as a foreign trade intern at an embassy in Madrid, or being a student in Copenhagen. Whether you spend a lifetime working and living overseas or you go abroad just once, you should actively consider taking the plunge. There are thousands of opportunities available and you can get started on an international career by building relevant experience now, while you're still at school. Why should you? Because going international is just plain life-changing! Read on and consider the tips presented below:

Ride the Wave of the New Global Economy

In the new global economy, millions of cross-border relationships are being built in all sectors of the economy. A new workforce is emerging to manage these relationships and its members have a new currency – a clearly definable set of “international work skills.” Are you preparing yourself for this new global reality?

If you want to participate in the global economy, you need to build cross-cultural experience now, while you're at college. Most international employees start their careers in the same place: they study abroad, learn a foreign language, travel extensively, intern abroad, and take international courses. The lesson here is that you need to gain exposure to other cultures. That's how you can become proficient in dealing with people who have different perspectives from you.

Here are 24 ways to gain international experience and start building your international personality while still in school:

Gain International Experience on Campus

- **Acquire a Passport:** It can take many weeks to process a passport application, and unless you already have one, you can't go abroad on short notice. So get one now, even if you are unsure about future travel.
- **Read international news:** You need to have an international understanding of the social, political, and economic aspects that affect the world. Read international magazines and learn to locate the 194 countries in the world. Editor's advice: read *The Economist* every week.
- **Enroll in internationally oriented courses:** Take a course with an international focus in your field or in a completely separate field. Having three of four internationally focused courses looks great on a resume.

- **Befriend foreign students:** Have coffee with them regularly and you will learn much about their cultural habits. Practice your foreign language skills. Join in with foreign students at social events as your relationships with them progress. Invite them to visit your family, and try to visit them in their home country (perhaps on Christmas break). Join your school's international students' buddy program. You may be surprised when you find yourself learning about your own culture, too!
- **Join international clubs:** There are many student groups on campus with a specific international focus. Take on positions of leadership and try to gain experience managing programs in an international setting. Gain awareness about international organizations and how they work.
- **Network with international experts:** Find internationally-focused people who can open doors for you. Associate yourself with professors doing international research. Write inquisitively to international experts who have impressed you. Plan to write essays that allow you to engage in conversations with NGO managers or civil servants at the state/provincial and federal levels in your field. Call up a long-lost cousin who is abroad, and get yourself invited to stay with him/her for a semester abroad.
- **Join multi-ethnic student work teams:** Seek out international students on your campus to complete class projects or organize events. This is a valuable and easy way to show employers that you have been successful in a cross-cultural work environment. Ramp up the value of this experience by getting permission from your professors to put together a class project with students located abroad. By using internet technology to organize such a group, you can legitimately write on your resume that you managed an international research project and team.
- **Participate in international conferences or events:** Attend or volunteer as an organizer for any type of international conference being held on your campus (or abroad). Search the web for opportunities with international conferences relating to your field of interest in your city or region, as well as internationally. Target professional organizations, business groups, or academics. What's important is that you interact with international participants and acquire international skills.

Go Abroad While Studying at College

- **Short-term study abroad:** If you are hesitating about forging ahead on your own to go abroad, join a group for a two- to six-week study abroad experience. A guided group tour is a great starting point, especially in your

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first and second years at college. But this experience may not be enough to have lasting impact, so read on.

- **Study a semester or more abroad:** One or more semesters abroad will ensure that you will reap long-term benefits of a “total immersion” cross-cultural experience. You will also gain international credentials that can be carried forward into a future career. To make this first step easier, pair up with a school-mate and go abroad together. A good time to go could be between your third and fifth semesters in an eight-semester / four-year program.
- **International scholarships for study or research:** There are more of these available than you might first expect. Begin your research twelve to fifteen months before enrolment. Ask for help from your professors.
- **Plan for a Master’s degree:** In today’s competitive world, especially when working in an internationally- oriented position, a Master’s (MA, MSc, MBA etc.) is becoming the new minimum requirement. It may not yet be essential for engineering or computer science graduates, but it is critical social science or business graduates. Generally, it is best to take a year off between undergraduate and graduate studies to gain broader life experience. While studying at the Master’s level, extend the time of study by six or more months to include a stint abroad to do research or more study. Consider taking an MA or at least a few MA courses in another country. The current world-wide trend in non-English speaking countries is to offer Master’s level courses entirely in English, and often at very reasonable costs. Even if your MA degree remains incomplete, you still derive enhanced career benefits by studying at the Master’s level while abroad.
- **Career experience while studying abroad:** You can double the value of your time abroad by orchestrating a professional experience while studying. Organize a “welcome” event for other international students, join a student club and take on a leadership role, organize a student team to meet with local experts in your area of interest, organize a site visit. Employers want to see that you successfully organized something while abroad in a culture other than your own.
- **Make friends with local people:** While abroad, don’t get caught in the expatriate ghetto or hang out only with fellow nationals. Make every effort possible to make local friends, improve your language skills by talking to them, cook meals with them, get invited into their homes, meet their families, travel with them on weekends. The act of crossing cultures by making local friends is essential for building global career skills.
- **Extend your stay after studying abroad:** There is no easier time to gain international experience than when you are abroad. A four-week extension after a study abroad experience is enough to double the value of your time abroad. Extend your stay to travel, learn a language, volunteer, take alternative courses, intern, or work.
- **Participate in cross-cultural orientation programs:** Now that you have experienced culture shock and re-entry shock, you can solidify your international skills by helping your school organize and deliver orientation programs for students going and returning from next year’s study abroad programs. With a little work, you can easily develop the skills that will allow you to expertly communicate the cross-cultural experience.
- **Intern abroad:** This is a must-do strategy for seniors and recent graduates. Don’t miss out on the many international internship opportunities sponsored by private businesses, international organizations, foundations, volunteer agencies, and governments. And don’t discount the often successful strategy of finding your own self-guided international internship by contacting employers directly, or by linking up with friends, acquaintances or relatives living abroad. Extend your stay abroad by organizing a junior consulting position or second internship. Do this by selling your knowledge of the local environment to international employers and consultants.
- **Teach English abroad:** Use this experience as a stepping stone to other international jobs. There are tens of thousands of North Americans teaching English abroad. With over one billion people wanting to learn English, you can easily go abroad to teach English in the country of your choice, and work your way into your field of expertise while you’re at it. For example, if you are a business student, upgrade your teaching job and teach business English. In this way, you can meet business people who can employ you. Many young professionals do the same, teaching science English, music English, and technical English, to name just a few possibilities. After teaching English for four months it is also possible to upgrade your position and become an English editor, reporter, tour guide, or cross-cultural business consultant. NOTE: If your native language is not English, but another in-demand language (e.g. Spanish, Mandarin, etc.), follow the above approach to teach while you are studying abroad.
- **Learn a language abroad:** Full immersion in another culture is easily the most productive way to learn another language. For less than it costs to lie around on your couch for four months (probably around \$4,000), you could move to the wonderful city of Antigua in Guatemala, live with a local family, and have a full-time one-on-one language instructor to teach you Spanish. And voilà, in four months your life will have changed forever: you will have become fully functional in Spanish. For a little more you can learn French in Quebec City, or, for even less, learn French in Cameroon.
- **Travel abroad for 3 or more months:** Do not underestimate the value of backpacking for three to six months in regions of the world that will provide you with a cross-cultural learning experience (i.e. avoid English-speaking countries). While traveling the world, (including working holiday travel) and interacting closely with people from other cultures, you will learn the international skills you need, and capture the interest of future international employers.
- **Gain professional experience while abroad:** Make a point of visiting organizations related to your field. Examples: an environmental sciences student could offer to translate a trail guide for an eco-tourism business into English; a business graduate (or anyone with basic computer skills) can easily set up Quicken Accounting software for a non-governmental organization; an engineer can visit a mining site; and almost anyone can offer to teach Word or Excel to a third world NGO.
- **Network with people who live and work internationally:** Looking for future international work is a lot easier when you already know people who are living and working abroad and can envision their lifestyle. Prior to your departure abroad for travel or study, research (via the expatriate clubs on the internet or personal acquaintances) the names of people who are already living in your host country. This list may include diplomats, NGO staff or international business people. Visit their offices; take tours of their facilities or programs, meet with them at their social clubs, etc.

Gain International Experience Outside the College Environment

- **Gap period to go international:** Don’t hesitate to take one year off while completing a four-year university program, or just after graduating. If financing your trip is an issue, work for six months, saving vigorously, and then travel for six months. Extend the value of your money by combining traveling or language learning after a semester studying abroad for example.
- **Volunteer abroad:** Join a short-term volunteer abroad program. There are thousands of programs, each provides opportunities to travel and learn. Many programs also offer great options for building leadership skills. All of these experiences are valuable.

The Essentials

Experience has shown that those who are successful at finding international work have all done something a little extraordinary to land their first job. They have gone out on a limb, acted boldly (but politely), been entrepreneurial, sacrificed certainty and taken risks to gain experience and land that first job. You can prove that you have what it takes simply by being curious and, ultimately, having fun while abroad. You may find many excuses for not going abroad, but, in the final analysis, there are many more reasons to do so than there are to sit around at home doing the same old thing you’re used to doing. Get out there and enjoy the world!

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