

As an international student looking to gain career-building experience in North America, your challenge will be proving to employers that you have a solid understanding of North American business protocol and can build bridges between the local culture and your own. Your academic training will not adequately prepare you for the professional work environment. You'll need more experience to learn how to plan, organize, work in teams and understand the politics of work and leadership. Maximize your time. Get your hands dirty. Use the strategies suggested below and use your imagination!

## Connect With Local Culture

- **Socialize:** Social interaction is essential for understanding the subtleties of North American culture. Make the effort to interact – you will gain friendships while building understanding.
- **Don't get caught in the "foreign student ghetto":** While it may be easier to socialize with other international students or people from your home country, you'll miss out on a key part of the study abroad experience. Step out of your comfort zone and meet locals.
- **Be a cross-cultural observer:** Make understanding all levels of the culture your primary objective. Observe behavior as well as work, study and social environments.
- **Be proactive:** Stay outgoing, curious, and patient. Walk where you haven't walked before, talk to new people, and have a sense of humor; some of the richest interaction is unexpected.
- **Join student groups on campus:** Join North American student groups instead of international student groups. Take risks – join groups you might not have considered before: a sports team, a debating club or the political science association.

## Volunteering

Volunteering is a great strategy for building skills and cross-cultural credentials while studying in North America. Many employers are willing to take a chance on someone willing, motivated and enthusiastic.

- **It's not about cheap labor!** Volunteering has always been a part of North American society. It can be seen as a way of working in exchange for the knowledge you gain on the job, or simply as a way of giving back to a community.
- **Volunteering is a skill-building experience:** Through volunteering, you'll gain an understanding of North American culture and workplace protocol. You can also cite this real-life experience to future employers and on your resume.

## Volunteer for Social Interaction

- **Build cross-cultural knowledge:** Selling beer tickets side by side with local students can be just as valuable as undertaking a leadership role. Be a serious cross-cultural observer and you will gain invaluable insight.
- **Take volunteer positions that require interaction:** Social welfare organizations and other off-campus organizations will have volunteer opportunities that require one-on-one contact. These are great cross-cultural skill-building opportunities.

## Build Job Skills While Volunteering

- **Take on a role that builds non-academic expertise:** Join an organization and take on the role of treasurer, publicity coordinator, or membership promoter. These roles allow first-hand insight into the workings of North American committees and boards, while putting you in contact with officials. Take on leadership roles that require you to take minutes, design work plans, coordinate group phone calls, create documents, tables and PowerPoint slides.
- **Offer your services:** Offer to work for free on a research project; become a tutor for other students; offer your services at a conference to design a database to produce nametags, invitation lists, etc.; offer to be the host for a group of delegates.

## Self-Directed Internships

In an internship or low-wage job, you work in exchange for experience. Here are some alternative strategies for gaining cross-cultural work experience:

- **Create your own internship:** make your own internship proposal to an organization or company. If you show some big picture thinking and entrepreneurial zeal, you may be able to score a self-directed internship.
- **Work for low wages:** North American employers value young professionals who have experience in "humble" jobs (ex: work as a receptionist or in a cafeteria). It demonstrates personal attributes such as fortitude and a strong work ethic, as well as your ability to function in an international work environment.

## Network With Experts

- **Contact embassies:** Call or visit embassies from your home country or region and find out which North American organizations work in your part of the world (government departments, consulting firms, NGOs, private sector organizations, etc.). Build a database of these organizations, research them, and make a special effort to contact the experts in your field who work for them.
- **Contact local experts who have links with your home country:** Offer translation or editing services for your native language, offer to be a volunteer "cross-cultural trainer" for any professional or expert preparing to travel to your home country.
- **Create a cross-cultural training course:** Develop a one- to two-hour training course about your home culture. Contact large NGOs operating in your home country for a template and course material to help you outline and research your presentation. Offer it to local experts or organizations that travel to, or work with, your home country.
- **Write essays:** Choose a topic that requires you to speak with local experts in your field of study. Organize a networking visit and meet with them face-to-face. For example, meet government employees in your field of work to ask for guidance choosing a research project, or ask for current field reports and write an essay on these.
- **Become a cross-cultural expert:** Once you are able to discuss North American culture articulately, you can offer your services to your embassy, consulates or trade offices. As an expert on the North American identity, you could be a tour guide for foreigners visiting your host city.

## Learn Practical Skills

Certain volunteer or intern positions will provide you with the opportunity to learn hard skills as well as soft skills.

- **Learn English:** take the opportunity to master spoken and written English in a "total immersion" environment
- **Write Professionally:** business letters, agendas and minutes
- **Learn Computer Skills:** Word processing, using spreadsheets and databases, PowerPoint, and web research are basic skills required to succeed in the North American job market. Accounting systems like Quicken will also help you learn about income statements, balance sheets, expense claims and bank reconciliations.
- **Develop Project Management Skills:** Understand project life cycles, project plan creation, MS Project software and resource management.
- **Develop Organizational Skills:** In North America, organization and efficiency are crucial. Be able to create to-do lists, agendas, executive summaries and project implementation plans.
- **Build Business Skills:** Develop strong communication skills, be knowledgeable of marketing strategies and break-even analyses.

These are sure-fire strategies to build cross-cultural knowledge and be successful while studying in North America – and they can be a blast too! Just remember: you'll have to be willing, motivated and tolerant. You may be assigned menial tasks and the work may not be organized, but go forward with a sense of humor, knowing that the insights you gain will prove invaluable in your future international career.

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