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!

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.
Career-boosting Strategies for International Students Studying in North America

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