

Welcome to Maryland – Now Fly Away

As the start of summer shines promisingly on the horizon, perhaps you and your family are looking forward to some travel together, maybe even to an international location. No doubt the juggling of work schedules, summer camps, weddings, graduations, family reunions and all the other wonders of this season makes planning for family vacation a challenge. Are you able to coordinate everyone for a week away? Maybe two? Can you imagine 3 weeks away? What about 3 months, or even more?

When you finally arrive at your destination, possibly exhausted from the packing and preparation, what do you have planned? Can you imagine going on a historical tour through the streets of London? A visit backstage at a traditional Japanese theater? Building a school in Cameroon or perhaps observing unique wildlife on the Galapagos Islands?

If this seems unlikely, you are probably right – unless you think like a study abroad student. At the University of Maryland, we encourage students to think outside their borders. While they may travel as adults, perhaps for as many as several weeks at a time, the chance to live and learn abroad as an undergraduate is truly a once in a lifetime opportunity. Students who have never been inside a museum in their life report being amazed as their professor showed them the genius of artists from the royal courts of China. Seeing through the eyes of an experienced teacher how London's history is carved into its cobblestone streets and hidden passageways encourages them to look below the surface of any city they visit. Living with a family in Lesotho allows students to attach faces and names to the complex questions in African countries. Helping villagers in El Salvador develop ecotourism is also a great way for students to become more proficient in Spanish.

If this all sounds too good to be true, it isn't! Almost 1,600 UM students followed their dreams overseas last year and returned with a renewed sense of self, citizenship and professional goals. Perhaps you are thinking it sounds too expensive to be feasible on your family's budget. If you are paying in-state tuition for your son or daughter, consider reapplying the money you might have spent on private or out of state costs at another university to a study abroad experience. In-state students can apply all of their federal, state and university aid on UM programs. If you are an out of state family, rest assured that both your federal and university aid can be applied to study abroad as well. It's worth mentioning that there are additional scholarships available only to study abroad students and these are often widely available to needy applicants. Has someone in your family recently assumed the responsibility of a car loan for a vehicle that will last a few years? Consider investing in a study abroad experience that will propel your son or daughter for the rest of their life. Naturally there are some wonderful international programs that are less expensive than a semester at College Park. Who knows – you may even save money by studying abroad!

President Mote has repeatedly stated that he believes every undergraduate student should have an international experience. In the age of globalization, a student who is not

prepared to meet the world with open arms and an open mind is likely to fall behind their peers who are poised to do so. Employers and professional schools consistently cite flexibility, team work, communication skills, leadership and other factors as characteristics they look for in their applicants. Imagine that your son or daughter is 1% of the undergraduates nationwide who studies abroad and can discuss their qualifications in these important areas within the context of their international experience. Fortunately, more students study abroad at UM than the national average but it is still an experience shared by a few. By working with their academic advisor from virtually all majors on campus, students are still able to graduate in four years.

All study abroad programs are based on a foundation of learning, but the ways this can be accomplished are as diverse as the places on the planet our students select. It is possible to conduct an international internship and gain valuable practical experience in a chosen field. Service learning opportunities are available to undergraduates invested in bringing the richness of their own culture to people in need, even as they look forward to bringing back with them a lifetime of memories too precious to be priced. While many study abroad programs are based on solid, classroom instruction, many also add academically structured excursions to sites of interest so that students can see the places they live as living laboratories of learning.

One wonderful way to know the world is by learning the languages they speak. There are abundant ways for students to think outside their borders while speaking in a foreign tongue. It is advisable for students to learn at least some of the language in the country where they live (even if this is not a focus of their study and English is not the first language of that country) since this is such a fundamental component of any culture. There are ample opportunities for students to study in English as well, by exchanging some jolly good vocabulary in London, basking in the pleasure of a “g’day mate” in Sydney or even discovering that virtually everyone in Copenhagen is a fluent English speaker.

Study abroad is an experience almost exclusively unique to the undergraduate experience. It can be affordable, even less expensive than a traditional campus semester, and helps students distinguish themselves in professional pursuits. As they learn from the people they encounter, they are also provided with opportunities to participate in global conversations regarding human rights, economic growth and religious inquiry. Thinking outside their borders sets the stage for a lifetime of looking beyond and below the surface of where they live, work and play so they can see the forces that shape our world. We look forward to welcoming your student to campus – and telling them to fly away – to Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America and Australia! But we want them to come back, and share their experiences with other Americans so our planet can become a bit smaller but the possibilities much bigger.