“Crafting Your Stories”

Identifying the skills and qualities developed from your international experience and putting them to work in the interview process.

MN Study Abroad Re-Entry Conference
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Through this Experience...

1. By having studied abroad, one of the most important things I discovered about myself is

2. One of the most important things I discovered about how to get along with people from other backgrounds is

3. A personal attitude or characteristic that has changed as a result of studying abroad is

4. One thing about people in my host community that I came to accept with some difficulty is

5. For me, the single most difficult aspect of living in another culture has been
What have I gained from my experience?

Directions: Listed below are statements describing many of the changes that have been made by returnees during the past three decades. Some of these may be changes that you, too, have felt. If you haven’t thought very carefully about how you have changed, this list may be especially helpful in making you more fully aware of what has happened to you. Read through the list and place a (√) by each change that you believe has occurred in you.

- I have improved my ability to speak a foreign language.
- I am more knowledgeable about another culture and lifestyle.
- I have a greater ability to empathize with others, that is, to put myself in their place when making judgments.
- I can accept failures and shortcomings in myself more easily.
- I understand more fully my own strengths and weaknesses.
- I am more confident and positive when meeting new people.
- I am more confident and assertive when facing new situations.
- I have a greater capacity to accept differences in others.
- I am more able to share my thoughts and feelings with others, and to be open when others wish to share theirs with me.
- I have more curiosity about and respect for new ideas.
- I have a clearer notion of what I will do with my life.
- I am more flexible and able to adjust to changes in others.
- I am more tolerant of ambiguous situations, that is, of situations that are confusing and open to different interpretations.
- I have more ability to see myself objectively, that is, to see my own day-to-day problems in a broader, more realistic context.
- I am more deeply committed to an idea, cause, or goal.
- I have increased my perseverance and self-discipline.
- I am more willing to strive and sacrifice in order to do well in my studies at school or in independent learning projects.
- I have a greater willingness to take on roles and tasks to which I am unaccustomed.
- I have increased my capacity to experiment and take risks.
- I am more able to accept as valid other values and lifestyles.
- I have a deeper understanding of (if not necessarily commitment to) the values and lifestyle of my native community.
- I am more aware of the opportunities in life that are open to me.
- I feel greater respect and appreciation for my natural family.
- I am more independent in my relations with family and friends.
- I feel that I need fewer friends but deeper (more intimate and more trusting) friendships.
- I am more aware of the way I use and structure time.
- I have greater capacity to profit from my mistakes.
- I am more interested in and capable of laying long-range plans.
- I am more determined to fully develop my skills and talents.
- I feel a greater need to have diverse experiences and friends.
- I am more balanced in my judgments, that is, less likely to judge things as “good” or “bad,” “right” or “wrong.”

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I am more likely to do things spontaneously, that is, to do things without undue concern about possible consequences.

I am more capable of solving life’s day-to-day problems.

I think more critically; I am more discriminating and skeptical.

I have improved observation skills.

I need more time to be alone.

I am more confident about the decisions I make.

I feel more surely that common bonds unite all human beings.

I have a deeper understanding of the problems and issues that confront all human beings on this planet.

I have greater awareness of political, economic, and social events occurring around the world.

other: __________________________________________________________________________________________

other: __________________________________________________________________________________________

Go back now and place an extra check mark (√√) by those two or three changes that seem the strongest or most significant.

What effects do you think these two or three biggest changes will have on you and your relations with others within the next three to five years?

Explain below for each double-checked change.
Career Profile Summary Worksheet

Instructions:
1. Complete one summary worksheet for each position or job function you are experiencing.
2. This information can vary significantly from organization to organization, even within the same function.

Name of targeted position/job function: ________________________________

Type of organization(s): ________________________________

Skill necessary by successful people in targeted position:
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

Qualities possessed by successful people in targeted position:
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
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A typical day in the life of a person in a targeted position:

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<th>Activity</th>
<th>% time spent</th>
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Possible Outcomes of an International Experience

Skills

Establish rapport quickly
Function with a high level of ambiguity
Achieve goals despite obstacles
Take initiative and risks
Time management skills
Identify problems and utilize available resources to solve problems
Accept responsibility
Communicate despite barriers
Learn quickly
Handle difficult situations
Handle stress
Manage/Organize
Lead others in formal and/or informal groups
Conduct research despite language and cultural differences
Cope with rejection
Adapt to new environments
Understand an organization’s culture
Learn through listening and observing

Qualities

Self-reliance
High energy level/enthusiasm
Appreciation of diversity
Perseverance
Flexibility
Tolerance/open-mindedness
Assertiveness
Inquisitiveness
Self-confidence
Self-knowledge
Independence

Focused Interviewing

When answering interview questions, recruiters are looking for concise, but descriptive responses. Focused interviewing techniques are often used by interviewers to draw out information from the candidate. If you are able to respond with a “STAR,” your responses will be concise and descriptive and the interview session will proceed more effectively.

What is a STAR?

S – Describe the situation.

While studying abroad, I found myself struggling with my Philosophy class. The system was different. I was used to getting more direction about what I should be doing and what the assignments were.

T – What was the task that had to be done?

After I got my first paper back, I was headed toward a “C” at best, which would have hurt my G.P.A. Also, I’d be falling below the standards I’d set for myself and what I wanted to get out of each class. I needed to get on track quickly.

A – What action did you take?

I formed a small study group with a couple of friends, and we’d meet over coffee once a week. Plus, I budgeted one hour each night, just to study for the class.

R – What were the results?

I was doing better by midterm, did well on second required paper, and did quite well on the final. In the end I earned what translated into a B- in the class, and actually felt I’d learned something valuable.

This is a typical STAR answer. It could be the answer to, “Give me an example of an accomplishment you are proud of.” If someone asked, “What’s your greatest skill?” you might answer, “I believe I can set goals and meet them,” and then give a story like the one above. Or, if the interviewer says, “Why should we hire you?” you can respond, “I am a good problem solver, for instance...” and give an example like the one above.

Can you see how having an example like this gives you more credibility than if you merely state “I can set goals and meet them,” or “I am a problem solver?”

The interview is your chance to speak to you qualities and qualifications; knowing what you want to say before you even enter the interviewer’s office can be a helpful tool in assuring that you’ll be able to do that. Having some STAR stories prepared in advance can help you be sure you don’t believe until the employer knows all you want him or her to about who you are and what you have to offer his or her organization.
Sample Story #1
I learned how to take initiative and problem-solve in a class I took abroad in England. The format was very different from what I was used to in the States. There was no syllabus and we received a very long reading list instead. There were mostly lectures given and not much discussion or interaction.

At first I was really worried because it’s not how I was used to learning. But instead of panicking, I tried to examine the differences from a more ‘outside’ perspective. I realized that if the British students managed in this system, I likely could as well.

I figured out that by asking my classmates a few questions about what was expected of us, by identifying and focusing on several of the key texts the instructor referenced and by committing to study time each week even though I wasn’t required to submit any work, I could keep up and succeed in the course. The final exam was a bit daunting, but I ended up doing quite well in the course. I realize now that I not only learned a lot about the subject area, but about my own learning styles and my ability to take initiative and succeed when challenged as well.

Note: Showing cultural respect is important. Note how this story doesn’t log any complaints about the system abroad. It speaks respectfully, in rather neutral terms about the differences.

Sample Story #2
I lived in a homestay during my semester in Spain. From this situation, I learned how to consider and respect different viewpoints and that it is possible to become very close to people with very different opinions than my own.

At first, it was a bit of a strain to communicate fully with just about anyone in the household. The host mother was sweet and used a lot of sign language with me. My host sister did speak a bit of English, but it was my host father who wanted to talk the most with me, and at first I was very challenged by my developing language skills.

Even more challenging was that he wanted to engage me in discussions on world politics, especially about U.S. foreign policy. He wasn’t happy about the U.S. influence in the world and asked me questions that honestly, I wasn’t prepared to answer.

I felt so ignorant with my limited language skill and by not knowing the specifics about the foreign policies of my own country. I faced this challenge head-on: I made a point to read the Spanish newspaper each day so that I could acquire both the knowledge and the vocabulary. Over time, I got pretty good at being able to engage in discussion with him. We had quite different viewpoints on a number of things, but his approach was not to insult but to challenge me respectfully.

I respect him for this, and I am grateful for the opportunity to see political discourse as an exercise in learning and not demeaning anyone. I am very close with everyone in my homestay and am still in touch with them.

Note: Carefully consider whether you think it’s a good idea to reveal your political party preferences in a job interview. This story does not ‘call’ either point of view by a name. While perhaps the listener could speculate on the political orientation of the storyteller, it still leaves room for ambiguity.
Tips on telling your stories in a job interview:

- Have 10-12 stories ready when you go into any job interview. They should be your real life experience stories from which you learned or accomplished something, or from which you acquired a new or reinforced an existing skill or positive quality.
- Include at least a few stories from your semester or travels abroad. The profound learning and the unique experiences abroad typically make for some great examples.
- Your time abroad has a certain ‘shelf life’ for greatest relevance, and you should use it to your advantage. If you study abroad as an undergraduate, your stories from that experience are highly relevant upon your return and for at least awhile after graduating.
- Don’t have all of your stories be from your time abroad! You need to show balance of all the kinds of experiences you have had in your life so far – for example as a student, an athlete, an employee (even in a part-time job), as the leader of a student organization, etc.
- A good way to build your collection of stories is to think about times when you have been especially challenged or taken a risk. Your story might be about something that happened on a given day (for example, you took the wrong bus in Beijing and got lost), or a situation that happened over time (you were challenged by the differences in the education system abroad). Either way, give it a beginning and an end while making a relevant point and specifically identifying the skill or quality it demonstrates.
- Be sure to show respect for cultural differences. No matter how challenging the situation was, you don’t want to use denigrating terms. Instead of telling how ‘ridiculously small’ your room was in your homestay, you need to explain that the room was ‘much smaller than you were used too.’
- Stories need to be appropriate. When in doubt, err on the side of caution. Be aware that even though you now understand that having a drink with friends in a pub is a common no-big-deal occurrence in Ireland, you may want to eliminate any reference to pubs, bars or alcohol in your stories since that may not be the frame of reference for your interviewer.
# Preparing STARs for your Interview

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<th>Skills/Traits</th>
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## What Skills Did You Use?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Manual/Machine</strong></td>
<td>build, construct, fix, operate, run, drive, or make</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sell/Market</strong></td>
<td>motivate, persuade, sell, influence, convince, promote, advocate, lobby, or publicize</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Physical</strong></td>
<td>athletic, physical strength, coordination, or ability</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Lead/Manage</strong></td>
<td>lead, manage, direct supervise, or facilitate</td>
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<td><strong>Research</strong></td>
<td>research, experiment, observe, classify, study, or investigate</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Decision-Making</strong></td>
<td>decide, resolve, select, negotiate, or arbitrate</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Problem Solve</strong></td>
<td>analyze, evaluate, diagnose, problem solve, adapt, improve, or strategize</td>
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<td><strong>Perform</strong></td>
<td>perform, present, entertain, represent, or model</td>
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<td><strong>Synthesize</strong></td>
<td>conceptualize, integrate, theorize, or formulate</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Implement</strong></td>
<td>execute, implement, administer, control, schedule, or follow-through</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Artistic</strong></td>
<td>draw, shape, compose, arrange, or display</td>
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<td><strong>Organize</strong></td>
<td>plan, organize, coordinate, or systemize</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Creative</strong></td>
<td>envision, develop, design, create, innovate, or improvise</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Numerical/Financial</strong></td>
<td>calculate, compute, budget, estimate or appraise</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Written</strong></td>
<td>Communication (write, edit, summarize, clarify, or explain)</td>
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<td><strong>Detail/Precision</strong></td>
<td>attend to details, copy, inspect, precision work, proofreading, collecting</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Helping/Serving</strong></td>
<td>help, assist, interview, nurse, nurture, or serve</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Consult/Counsel</strong></td>
<td>coach, counsel, advise, or consult</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Instruct</strong></td>
<td>instruct, teach, train, demonstrate, translate, explain or interpret</td>
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<td><strong>Other</strong></td>
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**Re-entry Conference**  
Tim Dohmen - Univ of St. Thomas 2011
Resume “Rough Draft”

Skill Phrases

Identification

Objective

Education

Experience

Activities
(Honors/Volunteer/Clubs)
**Desired Skill – Entry Level Job Candidates**

- Oral Communication skills
- Interpersonal skills
- Teamwork skills
- Flexibility
- Analytical skills
- Written Communication skills
- Proficiency in field of study
- Leadership skills
- Computer skills

**Cross Cultural Skills**

- Tolerance for Ambiguity
- Sense of Humor
- Low goal/Task orientation
- Warmth in Human Relationships
- Open-Mindedness
- Motivation
- Non-judgmentalness
- Self-Reliance
- Empathy
- Strong Sense of Self
- Communicativeness
- Tolerance for Differences
- Flexibility/Adaptability
- Perceptiveness
- Curiosity
- Ability to Fail