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The Foreign Legions

By LAURA PAPPANO

FOR a student at the University of Ghana in Legon, a palm-graced suburb of Accra, a dinner might involve fufu — mashed casava and plantains in a soup of peanut butter and tomatoes — from a local “chop bar.” Electricity is not a given. Nor is running water. Students might have to fetch buckets of water to flush the toilet and wash clothes. Forget sleeping in. They rise at 5 a.m., when the chaos and din begin: loud music and evangelical preaching, through megaphones. The “Challenges of Living in Ghana” handout from the University of California advises bringing earplugs.

The country, and its flagship university, have become a newly popular destination for studying abroad: about 300 American students, representing dozens of campuses, take classes at Legon.

But American students expect a standard of food and housing (and sleep) that is not typical in West Africa. So [New York University](#) has imported the creature comforts of home. Its nearby complex has air-conditioning (power guaranteed), 24-hour security, an on-site nurse, wireless Internet. Students who prefer not to take the 10-minute walk can use shuttle buses between the N.Y.U. Center, where they take class with N.Y.U. professors, and the Legon campus, where they are encouraged to enroll in a class. They eat in a dining hall that serves African food interpreted for “the American palate,” says Yaw Nyarko, vice provost for globalization and multicultural affairs at N.Y.U. Some, he says, think the accommodations are better than New York’s.

“We are creating an entire infrastructure,” he says. The ambitious N.Y.U. program can include mounting art exhibitions for American students in Accra and bringing over film professors from New York to accompany them to neighboring countries for film festivals. The semester comes to about \$28,000 all told.

Meanwhile, across the world, [Boston College](#)’s study-abroad program in Parma, Italy, includes skiing at Mont Blanc. Millsaps College, in Jackson, Miss., owns a 4,000-acre tropical forest in the Yucatán, where its students study archaeology, geology, sociocultural anthropology and even math, analyzing data from Mayan ruins. Students studying abroad in Costa Rica with the [University of Georgia](#) go white-water rafting on the Pacuare River.

Whatever happened to the junior-year excursion to Europe for foreign-language majors?

There is a consensus today, much like the one about science and math studies after the launch of Sputnik 50 years ago, that globally fluent graduates are essential to American competitiveness. International exposure, whether study, volunteer work or internship, has become a must-have credential. With the new demand — the number studying abroad is twice that of eight years ago — what was once an add-on has become big business. About 6,000 programs send students to more than 100 countries.

And for a generation whose life is calibrated by a multicolored spiral daily planner, just being abroad is not enough. They want to do more than study a language; they want an experience that complements their stateside curriculums. [University of Chicago](#) students can meet a civilization core requirement by attending a 10-week program taught by its own faculty in Mexico, China or India. Half of last spring's graduating class at Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts studied abroad — many in fields like engineering and science, whose rigid course sequences once kept them home. W.P.I. students are tackling projects like creating wireless security systems or flood-prevention plans in places as far afield as Limerick, Ireland, and Cape Town, South Africa.

In a world in which flying to Europe feels like driving from Boston to Pennsylvania, students are asking for more exotic destinations. They are going at different points in their college careers (entering freshmen at N.Y.U. can now spend their very first semester in London) and they're doing it in shorter bursts (some go more than once). At [Yale](#), 82 percent of those who go abroad do it in summer. Jane Edwards, Yale's associate dean for international affairs, gives the reasoning: "You worked so hard to come to this amazing university, why would you trade in one of your eight precious semesters?"

But for colleges, setting up science programs and a relevant experience in Africa or China is far more complicated than arranging home stays for art-history majors. Even colleges and universities that have long run programs — in some cases for more than a century — are straining to keep up as study abroad leaves the fringe and becomes a featured offering. [Indiana University](#), which sent its first students abroad in 1879, now offers 200 programs; it has a study-abroad staff of only 12.

Many colleges have had to look outside their gates, to other colleges, nonprofit organizations and for-profit companies that have the local connections to arrange housing, classes and services in countries where students want to study.

"The growth in demand is outstripping most campuses' ability to meet it," says William W. Hoffa, a former study-abroad adviser at Amherst College who now consults independently.

With the explosion in study-abroad programs, criticism from inside and outside the field has brought scrutiny of its practices.

[Andrew M. Cuomo](#), New York's attorney general, is looking into whether the tuition policies and restrictions on course credit at certain colleges prevent students from participating in less expensive programs offered by others. There is also concern that financial relationships between colleges and third-party program providers force students to pay more than the actual costs. Benjamin M. Lawskey, Mr. Cuomo's deputy counselor, says they have received information suggesting that familiarization trips paid for by providers have spurred study-abroad officials to use those programs.

"We are certainly examining whether study abroad has become artificially expensive," Mr. Lawskey says.

At the heart of the inquiry is the "home-school tuition" policy that many colleges are moving toward — students pay regular tuition and fees, no matter where in the world they go. Educators argue that the policy keeps students from choosing programs merely because they are cheap (and possibly shoddy) and encourages them to choose programs because they interest them. Critics counter that it discourages students from going to outside programs that are less pricey, or enrolling in a foreign university on their own.

In other words, Mr. Lawsy asks, “Does the home tuition policy end up making study abroad something that only the most well-to-do students end up participating in?”

Which leads to the field’s second front. The number of students going abroad may be growing — to about 6 percent of American college students, not counting those who don’t get course credit — but their profile has not changed. The latest figures available from the Institute of International Education, for 2004-5, indicate that 83 percent of participants were white; 10 years earlier, 86 percent were white.

Representative Tom Lantos, Democrat of California and chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, says that for too long study abroad has been “an exclusive [Ivy League](#) wealthy kid opportunity.” He is co-sponsor of a bill that would send 1 million underrepresented students each year to places like China, the Middle East and developing countries.

“It is really trying to reach out to a new group of students,” says the bill’s Senate co-sponsor, [Richard J. Durbin](#), Democrat of Illinois (his daughter studied abroad in London). The bill passed the House in June and awaits action in the Senate.

The legislation, which would increase student participation fivefold, reflects the evolution of study abroad from self-enriching activity to social tool. Aside from being considered critical to American economic and intellectual competitiveness, study abroad is also viewed as a way to improve international relations, one home-stay at a time. Mr. Lantos, who was born in Budapest, calls it “one of the most significant avenues for making the United States more competitive and more culturally sensitive.”

WHAT should the study-abroad experience look like? How much studying should be involved? How do you nudge students into becoming cultural learners?

As those in the field debate the shape and direction of international education, not everyone is happy with the way things are headed.

Carl Good, director of undergraduate studies in Spanish at Indiana University Bloomington, is disturbed at how the international experience is “being hawked left and right.” In his view, the new demand has yielded programs that are “half spring break and half really serious learning.” Some programs have minimal requirements for grade point average or previous coursework — and it’s possible to study in Spain without speaking much Spanish. “Now the barriers are so low,” he says, “more students may go who may not take it seriously.”

Brown and Yale will not accept courses on any basis but pass/fail. To focus students on academics, Indiana University applies study-abroad grades to the G.P.A.

Adam Weinberg, provost of the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vt., a nonprofit group that runs study-abroad programs, is bluntly critical of holiday-like offerings. “There is a lot of time for travel and vacation,” he says. “Study-abroad programs should be the most rigorous experience of one’s college career.”

The degree of rigor varies a lot. Some students bring back a semester of easy A’s. Others, especially those enrolled in foreign universities, work like dogs and still get C’s. In a Spanish university (not to be confused with a classroom of Americans in Spain), professors commonly fail half the class, Mr. Good says. “Students

are often dismayed getting a B or C or D when they expected an A.”

Academic and emotional demands are high for a program in which students enroll at the University of Bologna, taking courses alongside Italian students — including oral exams. “You really have to be good,” says Kathleen Sideli, associate vice president for overseas study at Indiana University, which runs the program. “Most of the students going to Florence could not do that.” Ms. Sideli says students get stuck on the image of “study abroad” as attending lectures at foreign universities, even if they don’t speak the language. In reality, programs are increasingly tailor-made for study abroad.

“Island programs” cluster Americans in a foreign location where they are taught mostly in English about culture, language and history, and take guided trips and attend cultural outings. The programs can allow a female Arabic major to travel more comfortably in a Muslim country, but they don’t force contact with local people.

Mr. Nyarko knows the N.Y.U. approach in Ghana is criticized as an “American bubble.” But, he explains, “What we do is give our students a home where they can come back and relax and then meet and interact with Ghanaian society on their own terms when they are ready for it.”

Caryn Gordon, who graduated last May from [Syracuse University](#), spent a semester in Madrid in an island program run by Syracuse, whose offerings are popular with other colleges and universities. She appreciated the English-language assistance from staff navigating a foreign city. “If there were times where you didn’t know where to get your hair cut, they would help you.”

Ms. Gordon lived with a local family and took classes with other Americans, many from Syracuse, about Spanish art and culture, only one of them taught in the language. She hadn’t initially wanted to spend a semester away — “I was a V.P. in the sorority,” she explains — but had heard “such great things” about studying abroad. “I just wanted to see more and more cities.”

“I didn’t feel the need to go out and meet Spanish people, just personally,” she adds. She did return home with a new circle of Syracuse friends she’d met in Spain.

Mallory Plaks, a [University of North Carolina](#) junior, rejected Florence, Italy, for the very reason that it is overrun with members of the study-abroad generation — “I might as well be in Chapel Hill.”

Seeing the places she was studying, in courses on the rise of modern Europe and Czech history, “was just very awesome.” But she hadn’t realized she would be living and taking classes with Americans (at a center created for international students). “I don’t know how I missed this,” she says. “I thought it was integrated with a Czech university and you would be around a lot of Czech students. Unless you went out of your way, you didn’t meet any.” Among her classes was beginning Czech.

Such miscues are common but puzzle study-abroad advisers, who don’t see how students without language skills imagine themselves enrolled in foreign universities.

ALEXANDRIA HOLLETT’S total immersion at the University of Bologna sounds more like “Survivor” than study abroad. Students stay in a pensione for orientation before the first challenge: Find a place to live. “Basically, what we had to do is walk up and down the streets of Bologna and rip flyers off the wall of Italian

students advertising for roommates,” she says. “It was a really stressful experience.”

At registration, classes she had planned on weren't offered, so she had to find other courses to count toward her triple major in English, Italian and Spanish (in Europe especially, professors switch what they're teaching at the last minute). Lectures lasted an hour and a half (the American standard: 50 minutes). Professors talked at students (no raising hands) and answered cellphones in class. One talked to a caller for 20 minutes, she says.

The oral exam at semester's end was “intense.” “The teacher would say, ‘Tell me something profound that is worth my time,’ ” Ms. Hollett recalls. “You have to know everything that was ever said, anything in a text, anything a teacher hinted at, but didn't say.” All in Italian. “For me, personally, I was really starting to appreciate the American education system.”

Not all students are prepared to cope with the challenges that arise from being immersed in a foreign society. “There are students who aren't ready to separate themselves from American culture and language,” says Eric Singer, dean of international studies at Goucher College, in Baltimore, which has begun requiring students to earn at least three credits abroad. “They don't want to be challenged about language, food, sports or what have you,” he says.

R. Michael Paige, professor of international and intercultural education at the [University of Minnesota](#), says the struggles of getting along — from figuring out how to make a phone call to managing a rocky host-family relationship — are central study-abroad experiences.

“This is not about saying you loved everything that happened to you,” Mr. Paige says. “The world wasn't set up so students could just walk in there and feel comfortable. They are walking into other cultural contexts.”

Last spring, Stephanie Brockman traveled to Oman. Then a junior at Yale majoring in Arabic and Islamic studies, she had realized that the more she studied, the more she “had no idea” what she was talking about.

But first, she went home — to a town of less than 1,000 south of Grand Forks, N.D., where she and her father rented a film about [Al Jazeera](#), the Arabic television network, and he fretted about the trip.

The Oman program, run by the School of International Training, included Arabic language class, a research project (she interviewed high school students about their plans for the future) and courses about Oman's culture and politics, taught in English.

But the real education was living with a family. For example, no speaking to the family cousin, a male college student living in the home — at least not more than “hi.” She struggled daily to secure a headscarf, relying excessively on safety pins. She was accompanied at all times. “They really don't understand alone-time,” she says.

Sometimes she escaped to the City Center Mall in Muscat, where she found sweet relief in the air-conditioning, got some culturally acceptable exercise (not pushups), practiced her Arabic with salespeople and sniffed the familiar scent of strawberry body butter at the Body Shop, her favorite destination.

On her return, longing for the spicy ambience of Oman, Ms. Brockman burned frankincense. She

appreciated the less rigid gender rules of the West but was struck by Americans' skimpy dress. "It was shocking how much skin I saw," she says. Even now, girls in tank tops and boys in shorts "still kind of bothers me."

In some respects, study abroad has become for this generation what going to college was for their parents. Being in a place a dozen time zones away, where Internet service and cellphones are unreliable, provides one of the first chances for true and prolonged independence.

Zena Bibler calls her semester in Buenos Aires "equal parts terrible and awesome."

Ms. Bibler was your typical overcommitted Yale history major, leading a modern dance group, helping New Haven teenagers talk out conflicts and catching up with friends by arranging "study dates." In a program arranged through Butler University in Indianapolis, she took courses at three city universities and shed her "tunnel vision."

She started going to dance halls to learn to tango and befriended (actually dated, much to the relief of her mother, who worried about her spending nights out) a police officer. A vegan going hungry in the land of beef, she discovered she loved meat-filled choripans for two pesos. She got around on buses that were routinely rerouted by political demonstrations (or a driver's whim). Her first host mother kept burning the food and gave her a tiny closet of a room with a window that didn't close. She found a second, happier home-stay.

"It made me more self-sufficient," she reflects. "I had to make decisions by myself. I couldn't call my dad and say, 'What classes should I take?' Instead of my mom telling me I would get sick if I stayed up three nights in a row, I just had to do it."

With her second host mother, she passed hours talking about Argentine life and politics while sipping from tiny white ceramic cups the Twinings Earl Grey tea she had brought from home.

Laura Pappano is co-author, with Eileen McDonagh, of "Playing With the Boys: Separate Is Not Equal in Sports." Her last article for Education Life was on student loans.

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