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Study abroad programs provide world of opportunities

By **Dawn Pauli**, contributing writer

With a whole world of opportunity out there, Margaret Pigott, international education director, thinks all students should study abroad to broaden their perspective.

"It's our duty to introduce students to the world," Pigott said. "After studying abroad, they come back very comfortable and knowledgeable about what it means to be an American."

One of the goals of Oakland University is to make global awareness a priority, and there's no better way to do that than provide students with opportunities to study abroad. OU offers students international education opportunities through exchange programs and a partnership with **AHA International**.

International Education programs include those to Rosario, Argentina; Vienna, Austria; Valdivia, Chile; Beijing, China; London and Oxford, England; Angers and Orléans, France; Cologne and Oldenburg, Germany; Accra, Ghana; Athens, Greece; Dublin, Ireland; Macerata, Italy; Hikone and Nanzan, Japan; Morelia, Mexico; Denedin, New Zealand; and Granada, Oviedo and Segovia, Spain.

Last year, 31 students participated in study-abroad programs, and Pigott is hoping to double that number this year.

"Sitting down with professors and students from other countries and having an exchange...it really can't be better than that," Pigott said. "Students learn the American perspective is not the only perspective in the world. We're a part of a much larger world."

Pigott recently returned from a whirlwind three-week tour of Europe, visiting campuses, attending classes and seeing firsthand how students and faculty live. She also surveyed the local areas, including transportation and cultural attractions.

She visited with students, professors and on-site coordinators in Dublin, London, Macerata, Segovia and Vienna. She checked out the apartments where students live and met with host families who invite American and other foreign students into their homes and lives.

In Macerata, Pigott asked a group of students about their favorite part of the program.

"In unison, they all yelled 'the food!,'" she laughed. "The food is out of this world in Italy."

While international study offers rich cultural experiences, wonderful food and amazing landscapes, the bottom line is the academic program at each university.

Pigott spent time with students and monitored several classes during her trip, meeting in classrooms and cafés. She also joined a class on an excursion to a museum.

In Vienna, Pigott sat in on a lively human rights discussion, the week after students visited the Amnesty International headquarters, International Crime Court and United Nations headquarters. The students were challenged to come to an understanding of definitions of crimes against humanity, where such crimes should be tried, and who dictates international policy on these matters.

"The professor held a spirited seminar in which all students participated, some arguing forcefully for United States supremacy, others just as forcefully for UN control of such matters," she said. "These are fantastic opportunities. The students are in the midst of this global situation."

In Macerata, Pigott attended an art history class where students prepared for their excursion to Urbino the following day.

"The professor used Leonardo Da Vinci and his coterie to reflect the prevailing concepts of the time," Pigott said. "The work of Leonardo would contrast, the professor pointed out, to the art they would see the next day in Urbino at the Palazzo Ducale of Federico da Montefeltro."

With more than 20 international locations to choose from, deciding where to study can be a difficult decision for students.

To help students decide, Pigott asks them pointed questions about the length of time they want to be away, the time of year, their budget and past experience. She encourages students to get their feet wet with a shorter program, perhaps a summer study program such as Oxford.

"There is a culture shock. A shorter program helps them learn to cope with a foreign situation," Pigott said. "The point of a program is to live in it, even for three weeks. If the student isn't prepared, often they don't finish out and go back home early."

"However, after participating in a short program, often students return because they see how international study expands and enriches their lives. They apply for a longer program, go into the Peace Corps, or get jobs that will send them back."

The most popular program for OU students is the summer Oxford program. Students live in Oxford, England, for three weeks, taking courses in fine arts, communication and political science. This year's Oxford program is July 4-24.

"This kind of experience, where different cultures meet, is invaluable," Pigott said. "Even though the Oxford program is short, the students come back really changed. They learn something about the rest of the world."

Elizabeth Pellerito, a senior English major, fell in love with Oxford last summer. She applied for the 2004-2005 academic year and was accepted to St. Hilda's, the all-women's college at Oxford, to study literature.

"The Oxford system of education is quite a bit different from Oakland's. Instead of going to classes, I will be studying with an individual tutor each day and maybe another student or two, and occasionally attending lectures at other colleges. Basically, it's a yearlong intensive independent study," Pellerito said.

Pellerito enjoyed the experience of living with other students in a cottage as well as attending plays with her class.

"The Oxford program offered a good balance between structure and independence," she said. "They had enough events and side trips to help us get our bearings and get comfortable in another country, but we were also free to explore on our own."

Many students are interested in studying abroad, but they just don't have the resources, said Pigott, who works with students to find creative ways to fund travels, including tapping the Rotary Club, the **OU Alumni Association** and **OU Branch of the Michigan State University Federal Credit Union**. She also sends students to the **Financial Aid Office** to apply for students loans and scholarships.

A new endowment will assist OU students who wish to study abroad with travel costs, including airfare and fees. William Goldenberg, CAS '70, and his wife Enid Bienstock, recently created the William Goldenberg and Enid Bienstock International Student Endowment after their children had positive international study experiences.

For more information on study abroad opportunities, visit OU's **International Education** Web site.

SUMMARY

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