

# CERI Research Brief 1-2008

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## Unpacking Your Study Abroad Experience: Critical Reflection for Workplace Competencies

### What you will learn!

- Skills and competencies employers value most from study abroad experiences.
- Strategies to help returning students articulate their skills learned/ developed through study abroad.
- An example of a model currently used at Michigan State University to *unpack* student experiences.



### Introduction

Colleges and universities are in competition to claim leadership in preparing students for a global world through participation in international experiences. Michigan State University (MSU) is often recognized as one of the leaders in study abroad, having woven the ethos of global education tightly into the core fabric of the university and sending more undergraduate students on study abroad annually than any other U.S. university.

One of the positive benefits often attributed with participation in study abroad programs is the importance employers place on this activity during the recruiting and hiring process for college seniors. Many colleges have spun this message into their promotional materials. It is intuitively obvious that having an international experience would benefit students moving to globally competitive organizations. Unfortunately, employers may not necessarily value the study abroad experience as highly as other co-curricular activities that students can choose to participate.

We began looking at this issue in 1998, when the Dean of International Studies and Programs at MSU asked CERI to incorporate questions on the value of the study abroad experience in our research with employers. Over the next several years we included questions about the relevancy of study abroad in our employer surveys on college employment. The results were not encouraging as employers placed low importance on study abroad compared to other activities. What we did learn was that students were not articulating their international experiences in ways that had meaning for employers. Study abroad has value to employers but students have to *unpack* or critically reflect on their international academic experiences and reframe their stories in the context of the workplace.

This brief shares the findings from our early research and how it led to the development and delivery of our *Unpacking Your Study Abroad Experiences* seminars for returning study abroad participants. The process we use is highlighted and we share some of the stories we have unpacked to illustrate the reframing of their experiences during the briefing. We provide tools for students to use in unpacking their experience as well as tips on marketing their experience in a more effective way.

**“Clearly,  
employers  
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### Initial Research

Our early questions probed the value employers placed on study abroad and their understanding of the types of international learning programs available to students. Approximately 20% to 25% of those who responded to these initial inquiries in some fashion valued study abroad. Generally their companies could be described as large multinational firms. Yet, it was clear from their comments that employers possessed little knowledge of what study abroad was all about. Many of them mentioned that study abroad was not available to them during their undergraduate days or they were not aware these programs existed.

Even though we could take some solace that one-fifth of employers embraced study abroad, the information we had did not tell us very much about how employers weigh the study abroad experience in their evaluation of candidates during the interview process. We designed a question for our 1999 survey that asked employers to indicate the level of importance they placed on activities listed on a candidate’s resume during their selection of candidates for on-campus interviews. Based on the responses from 327 employers, study abroad was moderately important to 34% of the respondents and highly important to only 5%. Slightly more than 60% placed little importance on the experience. Clearly, employers placed a great deal of importance on work related experiences over other types of activities as indicated in the following table.

Table 1. Employer Ratings on Importance for Selected Student Engagement, Including Study Abroad, in Reviewing Resumes in 1999 (% employers rated) N=327

Co-curricular Activity	Little importance (1-2)	Some to moderate importance (3-4)	Great Deal of Importance (5)
Summer Work (career related)	2	17	81
Internship	4	27	69
Co-op	8	29	63
Student Organization Membership	7	59	34
Community Service	16	68	16
Study Abroad	61	34	5

\*measured on a 5-point scale 1: Little Importance to 5:Great Deal of Importance

After discussing the results presented in the previous table, an argument was made that the study abroad experience would be more relevant and revealing in the interview than on the resume. We agreed to broaden the question in 2000; asking employers to rate the importance of selected student activities during the entire recruiting process that would include pre-interview selection from resumes through the candidate's interview. We also added additional activities to our list, specifically leadership and athletic participation. The results from 320 employers were nearly identical as the results reported the previous question year. Study abroad just did not generate a lot of traction from employers. This was a curious finding when juxtaposed against the rapidly expanding global economy.

***“In what ways will your experience abroad add value to my company?”***

Table 2. Employer Rating of Importance of Selected Student Engagement, including Study Abroad, During Resume Review and Interviews in 2000 (% employers ranked) N=320

Co-curricular Activities	Little importance	Some to moderate importance (3-4)	Great Deal of Importance (5)
Career related work (other than internships and co-op)	2	16	82
Internship	6	33	61
Co-op	14	37	48
Leadership in an organization	7	53	40
Student organizational membership	6	66	28
Community Service	13	71	16
Diversity Training	22	62	16
Athletic Participation	42	52	6
Study Abroad	57	40	3

\*measured on a 5-point scale 1: Little Importance to 5:Great Deal of Importance

In subsequent informal focus groups with employers we explored the factors that may be behind the appearance that study abroad just does not resonate as a useful experience in identifying qualified candidates. The conversations settled around three major themes: lack of awareness, academic tourism, and the inability to articulate experience toward the workplace.

Many recruiters could not frame the study abroad experience against the other co-curricular activities students may elect to engage in while in college simply because they had no exposure to study abroad programs as undergraduates. Nearly all recruiters pursued an internship and participated in student organizations as an undergraduate and could draw upon their experiences to relate to the students they were interviewing. However, for older recruiters, study abroad programs did not exist when they were in school and for many younger recruiters, study abroad programs were not prominently promoted by their institution (or they did not take the time to seek out international study programs). In the future we can expect a much higher awareness when today's graduates with global experiences take over recruiting functions in their organizations.

The impression recruiters often gain from hearing students describe their study abroad experience can best be summed up as “academic tourism.” Students' presentations are like a travel logs: highlighting the cool places they visited with a little academic work thrown into the mix. Employers often take away from the interview the impression that the study abroad was a lot of fun, but contained little substance. The inability to translate the study abroad experience into a framework recognizable to employers brings us to a third point.

Students were unable to give meaning to their experience in a way that employers could identify. From the array of experiences students have by graduation, employers want to know how these experiences have contributed to the development of skills and competencies in the work place. A typical question an employer might choose to ask a student is “In what ways will your experience abroad add value to my company?” Students have given very little thought to how their study abroad has shaped and prepared them for the world of work. In other words, graduating seniors have flunked one of their most important exams – the hiring interview because they were not prepared with appropriate examples of skills required from their international experiences.

### **Competencies/Skills Associated with International Experiences Gained While an Undergraduate that Employers Could Select From**

- Ability to work independently
- Adapting to situations of change
- Allocating time effectively
- Applying information to new or broader contexts
- Assessing impacts of decisions
- Being dependable
- Communicating ideas in a manner that gains acceptance/agreement
- Conceptualizing a future for oneself/organization
- Conveying ideas verbally
- Gaining new knowledge from experiences
- Identifying new problems/alternative solutions
- Identifying creative possibilities/solutions
- Identifying social/political implications of decisions
- Interacting with people who hold different interests, values, or perspectives
- Resourceful in accomplishing assignments
- Setting priorities
- Understanding cultural differences in the workplace
- Undertaking tasks that are unfamiliar/risky
- Working effectively with co-workers

## **Focusing on Competencies**

We stepped back and reexamined how we were determining the value of study abroad to employers. Our discussions with employers revealed that study abroad was valued and that in several ways could contribute to a highly qualified candidate and successful employee. These contributions centered on behaviors and competencies gained from the experience; not the experience itself. In 2003, we quickly drew up a list of 12 words and phrases that we believed captured the behaviors and competencies that could be enhanced by a study abroad experience. A question was crafted for inclusion in our annual employer survey.

The question to employers was framed differently than in our earlier surveys. They were asked to identify those traits that differentiated recent hires with international study or international internship experience from recent hires that did not have these experiences. Of the 376 employers who responded to the survey, 350 selected at least one trait from the list. The results showed a modest separation of recent hires with international experiences on a small group of traits. When we approached employers to confirm the finding they hesitated in validating the results. We had fallen into the same trap as our students. We had either used academic words and phrases or phrases that were too ambiguous to be meaningful in the workplace.

We continued to pursue this approach by working with employers to develop a list of traits and competencies that accurately reflected how the skills were defined in the workplace. Some of our original terms had to be broken in to multiple traits; critical thinking and communication serve as examples. At the conclusion of this exercise we had generated a list of 20 traits and competencies as listed in the accompanying sidebar. In our 2004 survey we repeated the question asking employers to identify those traits where recent hires with international experience stood out. Approximately 450 employers selected at least one descriptor; the majority selected three descriptors. This time the results produced a meaningful separation between those recent hires with international experience and those with no such experience.

Grouping the traits through factor analysis and correlations, the first group of traits showed the tightest relationship between items. Three traits were selected by more than 50% of the employers and one, gaining new knowledge from experiences, was picked by 45% of the employers. Traits in this group included:

- ***Interacting with people who hold different interests, values, or perspectives***
- ***Understanding cultural differences in the workplace***
- ***Adapting to situations of change***
- ***Gaining new knowledge from experiences***

A second group of traits emerged, receiving support from 35% to 40% of the responding employers. Employers still recognized that recent hires with international experiences excelled beyond their peers in these areas:

- ***Ability to work independently***
- ***Undertaking task that are unfamiliar/risky***
- ***Applying information in new or broader contexts***
- ***Identifying new problems/solutions to problems***
- ***Working effectively with co-workers***

Employers recognized that a study abroad experience could influence the development of all twenty skills and competencies listed. However, when the percentage dropped below 30%, we found it was harder to attribute study abroad as the sole contributor to the development of that trait. The remaining eleven traits received from 11% (conceptualizing a future for oneself/organization) to 30% (identifying social and political implications of decisions) support from employers. We decided to focus our attention on the leading traits, being aware that an individual student's international experience may contribute to the other competencies as well.

Employers reacted positively to this list. They cautioned that simply going abroad did not guarantee that these skills or competencies were actually utilized and developed. This is a similar point that employers say about internships. The value of study abroad depends on how well the student can reflect on his or her experience. Then they must successfully articulate to the employer the skills gained and how these skills/competencies can apply in the workplace. The results from the final survey and these employer comments prompted us to design a reentry program, now called *Unpacking Your Study Abroad Experience*, that provided a venue for students to reevaluate their experiences from the perspective of the workplace.

## **Unpacking Your Study Abroad Experience**

**Theoretical Underpinnings.** Our thinking is guided by an eclectic assortment of social and experiential learning theories. (Bandura, 1986, Wenger, 1999, Kolb, 1984; Chickering, 1969, 1997; Knefelcamp, 2000; Eyster, Giles, Schmiede; 1996)

***“The value of study abroad depends on how well the student can reflect on his or her experience”***



We draw mainly from social learning theory which is based on the premise that the interaction between environment, behavior and the person's psychological processes effect learning and identity. Of particular interest is Bandura's concept of *self-efficacy*, which refers to an individual's confidence in his/her ability to negotiate the challenges inherent in the larger social world. Study abroad experiences provide a variety of challenges which students must negotiate from public transportation systems, markets, menus and pharmacies to higher order things like language, customs, cultural norms and, of course their academic coursework. One of the reasons experiential learning in study abroad is so powerful is that it engages all four sources through which Bandura suggests self-efficacy expectations are learned:

- **Performance accomplishments (learning by doing, mastery)**
- **Vicarious learning or modeling (watching others perform);**
- **Verbal persuasion, for example, encouragement and support from others (or lectures from their professor)**
- **Physiological arousal; for example, the anxiety that arises in connection with the behavior. (As in the first few days of cultural immersion and the students' consciousness that they *have to behave differently and learn new things to get what they need.*)**

Learning by doing is one of the most powerful means by which students acquire new knowledge and master skill development (Bandura, 1986). Study abroad programs are inherently experiential, even if the academic portion of the program is entirely lecture. Studying abroad intensifies learning in context as students must adapt to new cultural realities, implicitly or explicitly. Returning students often talk about how they adapted to unfamiliar, and in some cases, uncomfortable situations while abroad as they learned to master new living environments. However, in discussions with students we often observed them compartmentalizing their academic and non-academic experiences. While this is rather typical of many college students, it seemed even more surprising among study abroad participants based on the integrated and immersive contexts in which they live and learn abroad. In our initial conversations with students we found that many have little more than a surface consciousness of their learning, i.e. "I learned something," but relatively few can articulate the knowledge, skills and abilities they gained, let alone demonstrate how they are transferable to other settings.

Ideally, study abroad programs integrate experiential pedagogy with purposeful reflection to capitalize on the unique cultural learning laboratory in country. Reflective learning exercises are common among study abroad programs, both structured and unstructured. The use of journals, blogs, reflective papers and group discussions permeate some of the best instructional design we have in our collegiate programs. However, as wonderful as these tools are, and as well intentioned as instructors can be, students often fake reflection as a necessary step in achieving a grade. Ask any group of students whether they have ever faked a journal entry or wrote something they thought their professor would like in a reflective paper; you'll get a majority of hands going up throughout the audience. Challenged by the feedback from employers and students struggling to integrate and articulate their experiences to skills, we built on the desire of many study abroad returnees to talk about their life abroad by designing an optional workshop outside the curriculum to "unpack" their experiences.

We set out to accomplish three main objectives in unpacking. First, to help students make critical connections between their learning experiences abroad, both inside and outside the classroom, in the context of career preparation. Second, to challenge the meaningfulness of their study abroad experience by probing deeper in to the ways it may have helped them develop academically, culturally, professionally, and personally. Finally, to help them find confident ways to articulate the skills and knowledge they developed through study abroad more effectively.

**A Typical Unpacking Session.** The workshop is offered twice each semester on a regular basis and when requested by a faculty leader. Designed to last two hours, there are four segments to the workshop: importance of skills and competencies to employers, doing authentic reflective practice, debriefing the unpacking exercises, and a wrap-up exercise.

The workshop opens with a short 15 to 20 minute discussion of the skills and competencies sought in candidates seeking employment. The key skills are defined in the context of the workplace. Then the skills and competencies that are closely associated with study abroad are introduced. By introducing the skills and competencies early, we shift the focus away from the academic confines of campus to the world of work. Realizing that many of the students who attend expect to attend graduate or professional school at some point, we have also established a second frame of reference and that is the self-statement commonly used in graduate school admissions.

A brief overview (10 minutes) of authentic reflective practice is covered prior to entering into the unpacking exercises. Students are provided with suggestions for doing real, not faked, reflection. We then chose one to two student volunteers to partake in a debriefing (unpacking) of their experience. We have a general idea of the types of study abroad experiences that students bring to the workshops through introductions at the beginning of the session. We try to select someone who has had a full semester away or an international internship for the first exercise because it allows us to draw out more of the skills and competencies. We have found that short, faculty lead study experiences require more effort to get students to articulate their experience; unfortunately some have very little to say. We try to do unpacking interviews with at least two student volunteers from the audience each session. A second unpacking depends on how long the first exercise takes (We usually expect the first one to last 30 minutes.) For our second volunteer, we try to select someone from a different type of study abroad program or a student who expects to matriculate to graduate school.

Our unpacking interviews are focused on making connections to the student's stated career goals or interests. By the end of their interview, they typically have a list of bullet points describing knowledge and skills gained that they can incorporate into a resume or a personal statement. Each interview is different, customized to help the student think about their experience in new ways and especially toward their intended career trajectory. The goal is to probe for depth (and a little discomfort) to help the student increase conscious learning, transferable skill awareness, and have the means to articulate it with concrete examples they can use in interviews with employers.

During the final 30 minutes, we direct students in an exercise that allows them to unpack one of their peers. This exercise gives the students practice in mimicking the reflective steps introduced by the exercise leader. The final 15 minutes stresses the different ways to present the skills and competencies in resumes and interviews. Throughout the unpacking exercised we have shown how the competencies can be introduced as bullet points on resumes to stories told during the interview. We leave the students contact information for career advisors who have been trained to help students unpack and encourage them to make appointments when they begin their job search or applications to graduate school.

### **Unpacked Student Experiences: Examples**

Students are notorious for compartmentalizing experiences; keeping academics in one box, co-curricular experiences in separate boxes, and social life in yet another. Our conversation with **Alex** (alias) began with a vibrant description of the social life in Rome, but we soon found a more compelling story. Alex was a junior general business management major who opted to study abroad in Italy and Cannes for the summer with an MSU led program in advertising and public relations to fill out his electives needed to graduate. The program started in Rome studying European advertising and ended at an international advertising festival in Cannes. He was the only male in the group of 25 and the only one without an advertising background. The class was structured into small groups; each group was to do a advertising project that would develop an effective ad campaign for an Italian audience. His initial response about the quality of his program was rather negative: he felt he got very little out of it that would help him in his career.

Alex had a lot to say about the group project. The trouble started immediately. His group project partners argued and bickered about whose idea was better. He thought he was at a little disadvantage because he really didn't have a background in advertising. As the bickering continued and time was becoming precious, Alex took it upon himself to take control of the group and instill some order and planning. He began mediating some of the conflicts, drawing attention back to the specifications in the assignment outline. Through his leadership, an idea and project plan were decided upon and tasks assigned to each member. He monitored the project's progress making sure each member stayed on their assignment. The group did well in producing a quality final product. Alex expressed regret that it wasn't a business project that would count. That statement needed to be challenged. We turned the tables a bit on Alex and

asked “If you saw someone from a different discipline work with a team of experts, earn their trust, guide them through a process of creative decision making, manage deadlines and specifications for a project that was completed in a quality way on time, what would you call that person?” Alex looked at us kind of blankly. It just took two words to prompt his realization “A manager.”

Clearly, Alex developed skills that could easily be reflected and valued by employers on his resume:

- ***Lead a project team of advertising students in developing an ad campaign***
- ***Mediated creative differences between team members***
- ***Managed project objectives and work assignments to successfully meet deadlines.***

As good as those bullets are, Alex and his team missed out on some critical opportunities for cultural learning to enhance the quality of their project. When Alex was asked how the group went about gauging the effectiveness of their product for the Italian market, they simply relied on their professor’s assessment and the advertising they saw in class. Although the group went out every night to a local bar where 20 and 30 year old Europeans hung out, they did not once solicit the opinions of any their European counterparts. Nor did they really pay attention to advertising on Italian television or other media. They totally separated their academic exercises from the social and cultural aspects of their trip.

Although some students quickly adapt to their cultural surroundings and grasp the cultural differences in their learning; too often they find it harder to identify and clarify the professional skill sets they have developed while abroad. **Marissa** studied educational systems in South Africa with an intended career in secondary education. During the course of her study abroad program she had the opportunity to do a practicum at a recently integrated Zulu-Afrikaner school. At the outset of the unpacking interview, Marissa was skeptical about the process because “things were so different there.” Through the debriefing, Marissa noted the wide cultural gaps between the two groups. She noted that many Zulu students were having difficulty transitioning to the teaching methods at the predominantly Afrikaner school. Her assignment was to work with Zulu students in a supplementary program to assist them in catching up. Marissa had some remarkable challenges. She couldn’t rely on what she had planned to do because resources she had expected were not there. She had to quickly adapt and restructure her plans. Some of the first things she tried didn’t work that well culturally with her students, so she had to readjust her teaching methods. She explained that she came up with different tutorials and games to assist Zulu students in their classroom learning. The most significant thing Marissa said she learned through her experience was a greater understanding of the teaching issues in post-Apartheid South Africa. When we tried to extract the transferable teaching skills she used in South Africa, she flatly responded, “I told you, nothing there is relevant to teaching here (U.S).” We were astonished, as was most of the audience who could see the skill connections clearly. Marissa had given examples of skills in understanding cultural differences, needs assessment, critical thinking, problem-solving, motivating others and innovating in the face of scarce resources.

We challenged her by asking, “So, if you were working in a mixed classroom of students in the U.S. with students from different national or ethnic backgrounds and income levels, might you not also use some the skills you used in South Africa?” And suddenly, Marissa had that *ah ha moment* of new realization. We crafted her responses in to resume bullet points:

- ***Assessed differences student learning needs in diverse cultural contexts***
- ***Developed adaptive strategies to maximize learning with limited resources***
- ***Designed tutorials, skill building exercises and learning games to increase student performance.***

Behind each bullet point was a story Marissa had shared during her unpacking interview. Ideally resume bullets are designed to provoke a question from an employer to give the student a stage for an example of that skill in action. As Marissa left you could see her rethinking her study abroad experience in new ways as she prepared for her teaching interviews.



Students enrolled in liberal arts programs and planning graduate study pose a little different scenario in debriefing. Take the case of **Jordan**, a senior planning on graduate school in chemistry. Like many students, she chose her study abroad program as a means of completing her general education requirements. A self-professed *science geek*, Jordan thought studying humanities in London was a far more palatable way of completing the courses she saw as a distraction from her scientific passions. She took a cadre of history courses taught by faculty at a British university. We approached the debriefing by discussing her experiences as examples of her role as a scholar in preparation for graduate study. She was skeptical that we would find anything worth going into her personal statement because “well, it’s not science.” What we had was a failure to recognize the process of scholarly inquiry across disciplines, and this gave us a focus. When probed about her studies, Jordan talked animatedly about how meaningful it was to see the locations featured in the history she was studying around London. It gave it *realness* beyond the books and lectures. She shared one of the biggest surprises about her experience was learning about the American Revolutionary War from the British perspective: “What was major to us was like ‘whatever’ to them.” This became the key to unlocking Jordan’s evidence-based scientific mind. We probed her on how she would resolve the differences between different cultural perspectives on history. How might she test her hypotheses? She talked about critically examining different sources for evidence. We then drew the conversation around to research projects she had accomplished in her undergraduate chemistry program, her observation of multidisciplinary approaches to scientific research, and the importance of hands on testing. How had she done that in London? Could that be why she found seeing historical locations so powerful in her learning? Through the rest of the debriefing we looked for ways to translate examples from her approach to studying humanities to her development as a scientific scholar. Jordan began to make connections about the ways she acquires new knowledge (hands on, observable fact), her ability to explore different perspectives on a topic (triangulation), and her skill in evaluating evidence before making a decision (expressed through curricular and adaptive skills learned in country). As she considered her personal statement for graduate school, Jordan felt she had a wider array of examples to draw upon to discuss her learning process more effectively.

### **Ripples in the Water: Where Are We Going**

At one of our early workshops a student who was preparing to go on her study abroad the following semester attended. She felt the workshop might help her be more purposeful in seeking out experiences while abroad. This student’s perspective led to us opening the workshops to prospective study abroad participants as well as to the returnees. We also promoted a pre-unpacking workshop for faculty lead student groups before they departed. While not used widely, some faculty have regularly used the unpacking workshop as a pre-departure orientation.

We have also developed a spin-off of the original *Unpacking Your Study Abroad Experiences* for our returning freshman seminar abroad participants. These students attend two-week-long programs over the summer prior to their first semester at MSU. *Unpacking Your Freshman Seminar Abroad* workshops are required and are designed to help these first-year students reflect on the connections between what they’ve learned on their freshman seminar and their college career, with a special focus on the first year. Accordingly, our background information and reflective exercises for these workshops are primarily based on MSU’s liberal learning goals as a means for setting the stage for their college learning. We do mention the competencies and skills we know to be important to employers and graduate schools. Students work in groups across the various freshman seminars abroad programs (currently in six countries), with each group focusing on one of the learning goals, including *integrated judgment, analytical thinking, advanced communication skills, cultural competence, and effective citizenship*. We debrief their discussions and then challenge them to think about how they might articulate the skills/competencies gained on their freshman seminar abroad to various audiences, such as their parents, friends, professors, and potential employers. Finally, students are encouraged to reflect on whether and how their freshman seminar abroad has influenced their academic and/or professional goals as well as their understanding of what it means to be a global citizen.

**“What we had was a failure to recognize the process of scholarly inquiry across disciplines, and this gave us a focus”**

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### Conclusion

From a career services perspective, one of our challenges is to get students to think more broadly about the array of experiences they've collected in which they have developed skills relevant to the workplace. Some of the most impactful learning experiences are not paid employment, but occur in study abroad, student organizations and service learning experiences. From our observations, students need help in making sense of their collegiate experiences and connecting their classroom, co-curricular and life experiences. Critical reflection and being able to articulate one's skills with meaningful examples is essential to ongoing professional development. Our work underscores the importance of helping students become more conscious of the transferable skills, knowledge and attitudes they gain which are assets in work and organizational settings.

Like many other study abroad offices, the MSU Office of Study Abroad had been trying diligently to attract students to post study abroad sessions that would help them reflect meaningfully on their experiences and integrate them into their personal, academic, and professional lives. It was not until we made the obvious connection with students' careers that students began to attend our workshops in large numbers. We learned from these sessions that personal and academic meaning come through a purposeful direction that students envision for themselves. We are encouraged by our workshops that students can gain significantly from participation in global education.

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## About Us

Established in 1985 by an act of the Michigan legislature, the Institute was charged with collecting and analyzing information on the initial employment (upon graduation) for the college educated workforce from all four-year institutions within the state. Later two-year graduates from the State's community college system were included in this responsibility. The Institute's charge rose from concerns of a "brain drain" during and following the economic recession of the early 1980's. Until the legislature rolled the Institute's funding into the University's overall budget in 1990, the destination of graduating seniors was the primary research focus. Without the legislative mandate, statewide reporting collapsed as several institutions no longer felt compelled to provide their information.

In line with this work on graduate destinations, research was started on: the socialization experience of new college graduates in the workplace; learning strategies used to enhance workplace performance; impact of co-op and internships on transition outcomes; and recruiter practices, such as use of resumes and behavioral interviewing. A major project which has stimulated discussions and program initiatives is on the acquisition/development of complementary skills and competencies that are required in the work, in addition to disciplinary mastery. This work has evolved into examination of co-curricular activities that support social learning/community of practice.

The research readily identifiable with the Institute is "Recruiting Trends." Michigan State University, for 30 years, conducts an annual survey of national employers seeking their intentions for hiring new college graduates. This study provides a snapshot of factors influencing the college labor market, as well as in-depth examination of key issues in college recruiting.

In the mid 1990's the Institute was asked to coordinate a segment of the University's assessment program, focused on outcome measures. The University's senior exit survey was redesigned to capture program and service assessments for colleges and units. This continues to be a key initiative for the University.

The Institute continues to provide leadership in the support of career development programs, student learning initiatives, and strategic planning around student outcomes.

Part of the Michigan State Career Services Network

