

The International Edge

Bringing study abroad opportunities to SEBS student scientists



“Tell me, and I forget. Teach me, and I may remember. Involve

This quote, often attributed to Benjamin Franklin, has no better application than in the context of study abroad. Just ask Francene Matias, an animal science major in the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences (SEBS), who traveled to Belize during the summer of 2015 to study large animals in a hands-on environment. Over the course of two weeks, with the support of her fellow students and under the close supervision of her instructor, she examined, assessed, vaccinated, neutered, spayed, and sutured animals in their natural habitat, from cats and dogs to chickens, pigs, and cows.

Matias’ two-week experience is already paying dividends in her academic career by enriching her understanding of the course material taught in her classes. “Since my study abroad experience was so hands-on, classes are more than memorization”, she says. “I actually understand the materials better because I experienced it.”

Beyond the university’s gates, Matias speculates that veterinary schools will take notice of her application, as her international experience helps to set her apart from other applicants. But perhaps more importantly, studying abroad opened her eyes to a different life. “Before I went abroad, I was a little scared of the experience,” she admits. “But coming back, I have a totally new mindset. It taught me to pursue what I want. It gave me the confidence to get more involved on campus. And it showed me a new world and a new culture. It was truly a life-changing experience.”

Making Study Abroad Possible

Thanks to the work of the International Programs Office, Matias is not alone. SEBS students of all majors

have access to a varied and vast range of opportunities that span all seven continents and countless areas of study. This type of office—one solely dedicated to enhancing study abroad for students of a specific school—is a unique model.

The office was formed in September 2008, and sent just four students abroad the following summer. Today, a mere seven years later, International Programs is celebrating a banner season, having sent 35 students abroad this summer alone.

“Part of this is that more students are learning about the opportunities and that interest in study abroad overall is growing,” says Megan Francis, assistant dean of international programs. “But the other part is that study abroad within the sciences has surpassed all other majors nationally, whereas previously, it was the least likely major to study abroad.”

That’s because science students often find it difficult, if not impossible, to spend a full semester away from campus. Their course load is too large, and their schedules are too packed. Yet another hurdle, affecting all students, is that it’s also very expensive to study abroad, and cost is a barrier for many Rutgers undergraduates.

The Summer Scholarship Program, a merit-based scholarship offered specifically to SEBS students, tackles these challenges in one fell swoop. By providing financial aid, it eases the cost burden associated with studying abroad; by financing opportunities that take place in the summer, it all but eliminates the course load barrier posed by academic year travel. And by bringing this opportunity to SEBS, science students get the hands-on experience they can’t achieve in labs alone.



me, and I learn.”

“I’ve had so many students tell me that they never knew studying abroad could be an option for them until now, and it’s because of that scholarship,” says Francis. “It’s a worthy investment in our students because we want to make sure that if they choose not to study abroad it’s because they’re not interested, not because they can’t afford it.”

Despite this success, Francis fields a lot of skepticism. Why should students study abroad when universities offer state-of-the-art labs right on campus? And why invest in student opportunities to study abroad when they can travel internationally on their own after graduation?

“I get these questions all the time. Here’s my answer: Travel and study abroad are two different things. With study abroad, students are integrated into the community and education system, and learn how to communicate on a different level—through body language, through research—which puts them a step ahead of their peers,” she says. “It’s one thing to study in a lab. It’s another to actually go to the native habitat and explore that wildlife and that ecosystem. To see how it works, hands-on, is one of the best learning experiences a student can have.”

Abroad and At Home

Though study abroad represents a central priority, many other initiatives are housed in and supported by the International Programs Office. Here’s a sampling:

Faculty research: SEBS faculty who want to collaborate with colleagues overseas will find an advocate and partner in the International Programs Office. From drafting contracts to facilitating connections, the office works hard to support international research among Rutgers’ esteemed faculty.

University partnerships: Sending Rutgers students and faculty abroad is just half the story; the International Programs Office also works to bring international students to Rutgers’ campus. One example is the 2+2 program, which allows international students to spend two years at their home institution, and two years immersed at Rutgers. At the end, they emerge with a degree from both institutions. The 3+2 program allows international students to spend three years at home and two years at Rutgers, earning a bachelor’s degree from their home institution and a master’s from Rutgers.

Semester programs: Summer might be the best time, but it’s not the only time to study abroad. Through myriad programs, students are able to enroll directly into an international university or participate in an exchange program to spend a semester or even a year abroad. The International Programs Office helps match international institutions’ curricula to Rutgers’, so students gain credits for their time overseas.

Photography by Kristin Licciardello, Courtesy of Melissa Koffie, Madi McIntire, and Taylor Franks.