

Maximizing Student International Study Options Under Tight Resource Constraints

Thomas K. Jewell, Ph.D., P.E.

Director of International Programs for Engineering and Computer Science

Union College

Schenectady, NY 12308

William W. Thomas, Ph.D

Director of International Programs

Union College

Schenectady, NY 12308

All engineering graduates from Union College are required to complete the “Other Languages; Other Cultures; Other Disciplines” portion of the College General Education program. Students can meet this requirement through completing three courses in a foreign language, completing a three course cultural diversity track (Africana, East Asian, or Latin American Studies), or participating in a variety of programs that require travel abroad. More than 85% of the engineering students at Union opt for actual international travel. The authors believe that Union is unique in having such a large percentage of its students experiencing first hand the culture of another country.

The international travel component can take several forms, including traditional terms abroad, engineering exchange programs, international internships in industry, mini-terms, or collaborative design projects. Some options require language proficiency; others do not. The first three options are fairly common, but the latter two require some explanation. Mini-terms are shorter, intense immersions in another culture accompanied by further study at Union. The time spent abroad is typically three weeks, and occurs during summer or intersession to avoid conflicts with regular classes. Interdisciplinary teams complete a comprehensive report on a topic related to the mini-term. In the collaborative design projects, students interact over the Internet with students at a foreign university on a cooperative design project. The project culminates in travel to the foreign institution for a design competition.

This paper will describe each of these options in some detail, then will present an analysis of how Union College is trying to maintain, and even expand, engineering student international program opportunities under declining budget conditions. To do this, Union is shifting emphasis from traditional terms abroad to more cost effective programs such as exchanges and international industrial internships. Lessons learned, the present situation, and future plans will be discussed.