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Northeastern, Once Local, Goes Global

University expands signature co-op program and foreign enrollment

By Karin Fischer

BOSTON
Less than a generation ago, Northeastern University was chiefly a local institution, drawing nearly three-quarters of its students from the surrounding New England states. Its alumni, too, largely stayed in the region.

Today, however, the university's horizons are global. Nearly 10 percent of its undergraduates come from overseas, double the proportion of just four years ago, and the number of students that it sends abroad has increased threefold over the same time period. This past year, the university, where banners across the campus proclaim its "Engagement With the World," was one of five recognized by Nafsa: Association of International Educators for its global focus.

"In some sense, Northeastern may have leapfrogged," says Stephen W. Director, provost and senior vice president for academic affairs, "and gone straight to becoming an international institution."

A hallmark of the university's global push is the internationalization of its signature cooperative-education program, which places students for up to six months in companies around the world. Students have worked for a soft-drink maker in Lagos, Nigeria; with an electronics manufacturer in Shenzhen, one of China's booming special-economic zones; and even at an Antarctic research station.

Jeffrey M. Riedinger, who serves on the Nafsa awards committee, says Northeastern's approach to international education is success-



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Sarah Tishler, a senior at Northeastern, is a research assistant at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, in Switzerland—strong preparation, she hopes, for a career as an international human-rights lawyer.

ful because it builds on a distinctive offering that has long attracted students to the urban campus. "It plays to the university's strengths," says Mr. Riedinger, who is dean of in-

ternational studies and programs at Michigan State University.

The approach also dovetails with growing interest among American students in not just studying

but working overseas. More than 18,700 students did for-credit internships or worked abroad in 2008-9, the most recent year for which data are available, accord-

A Once-Local University Globalizes Through Its Work-Abroad Program

ing to the Institute of International Education. That was a 37-percent increase over the previous year.

Setting up such overseas work experiences brings special headaches, among them wrestling with varying visa requirements and educating hiring managers for whom a co-op program may be a foreign idea. Still, Northeastern officials say that in an era when graduates want and employers demand global work skills, the effort is vital.

The co-op model is about “preparing students to go out into the real world,” says Joseph E. Aoun, Northeastern’s president, “and the real world is global now.”

‘AMAZING’ RESPONSE

A handful of other institutions, including Drexel University, the Georgia Institute of Technology, and the Rochester Institute of Technology, also offer international experiential-education programs. The University of Cincinnati has sent students overseas to work since 1992.

Overseas co-ops introduce students to international water-cooler culture and give them practical skills, says a corporate executive.

At Northeastern, students complete at least two co-ops, domestic or overseas, four to six months in length, or three co-ops if they enroll in the university’s traditional five-year bachelor’s-degree program.

More than 6,500 students at Northeastern participate in co-ops each year. But the university until recently had no formal program for placing students in co-ops overseas.

That changed when Lebanese-born Mr. Aoun arrived in 2006, with a mandate to take Northeastern global. One of his first moves was to establish an office of in-



COURTESY OF NORTHEASTERN U.

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ternational cooperative-education programs, naming as director Ketty M. Rosenfeld, who had previously assisted graduates, many of them foreign students, who sought work overseas.

Ms. Rosenfeld, who exudes can-do energy, had two challenges: attract students to go abroad, and find companies to hire them. To accomplish the latter, she turned to her database of overseas alumni, dating back more than a decade, and fired off dozens of e-mail messages. She also approached parents of current students, mining them for international links.

The response was “amazing,” she says. “Pretty soon, I had more openings than students.”

Faculty members proved to be good resources as well, connecting students with colleagues overseas. Sarah Tishler, a senior, landed a spot in Switzerland as a research assistant at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, a training foundation on peace-and-security issues, through Denise Garcia, an assistant profes-

sor of political science, who had a tie there from graduate school.

For Ms. Tishler, who is earning a triple major in international affairs, psychology, and French, the position was a good fit: She spent this past summer and fall conducting research and writing about the relationships among climate change, conflict, and migration—strong preparation, she hopes, for a career as an international human-rights lawyer.

OUT ON THEIR OWN

Ms. Tishler, who also did a short-term study program in China and spent a semester in Paris, came to Northeastern planning to go abroad.

Indeed, Ms. Rosenfeld says Northeastern’s ever-growing pool of study-abroad students is fertile recruiting ground for international co-ops. And as part of a revolving international door, many global-co-op students go on to study overseas.

Students who have done both say the co-op experience is often more intense. During co-ops, students

typically don’t have the on-the-ground services or support provided by many study-abroad programs.

Kristen Paonessa and Danielle Moore, international-affairs majors, spent the fall term teaching both English and computer courses at a nonprofit leadership academy for college women on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, rooming in a dorm with their Cambodian students. “People who live in Cambodia for years don’t get to immerse themselves as much,” Ms. Moore says.

Ximena Tovar, who graduated in December, sandwiched a semester studying in Shanghai between co-ops in Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic. While she enjoyed the study term, during which she lived with a Chinese roommate preparing to come to the United States, she says she didn’t get to experience the culture as deeply.

“It was more like tourism,” Ms. Tovar says of the study-abroad program, which was organized by an outside provider and included a half-dozen other Northeastern stu-

dents. "It was very structured, and it didn't give you the opportunity to really explore."

On her co-ops, by contrast, she was more independent. In Costa Rica, she found her housing through Craigslist. For her work with a Dominican microlender, Ms. Tovar, a native Spanish speaker who spent her childhood in Peru, traveled alone throughout the country, visiting the lender's mostly rural offices and meeting with loan recipients.

At first, she says, she would return to the capital, Santo Domingo, on the weekends, to hang out with other Americans. Soon, however, she grew close to a group of Dominican friends and even began coaching a youth basketball team. Eventually they began teasing her that she was more Dominican than they were.

ATTRACTING NEW INTEREST

At the same time, international co-ops may attract students who wouldn't necessarily have an overseas experience on their radar.

Corey Allard, for one, did not have working in Antarctica in mind when he enrolled at Northeastern four years ago.

"I liked the idea of a co-op," says Mr. Allard, a biochemistry major, "but I thought I'd do, you know, a more standard one, like work for a biotech company."

Instead, Mr. Allard found himself last year at Palmer Station in Antarctica—a placement that has allowed Mr. Aoun to boast that Northeastern has co-ops on every continent—studying the impact of rising ocean temperatures on the development of fish embryos.

Mr. Allard, who had never before traveled outside the United States, stayed through the dead of the Antarctic winter, when the temperature dipped to 20 degrees below zero and daylight was just two hours long. (To pass the long nights, he played guitar in a band formed with some of the other 17 scientists stationed there.)

While traditional study abroad frequently appeals to students interested in language and culture, international co-ops may draw those

with different, more bottom-line concerns, says Coleen Pantalone, associate dean of undergraduate programs at Northeastern's College of Business Administration. "They're not going overseas just for the sake of going overseas," she says.

Ms. Pantalone started the university's international-business degree, which features an "expat year," a semester studying at an overseas university paired with a six-month international co-op. The experience of living overseas is "a piece of it," she says, "but in the end they hope they will wind up with a permanent job."

About 15 percent of all business majors pursue the international degree, and the program has a 100-percent job-placement rate, she says.

Going abroad worked for Matilda Urie, who secured a job last spring designing wind farms after completing two overseas co-ops in Scotland, with a public utility and a renewable-energy company. Ms. Urie, a mechanical-engineering

major, now works for the energy company E. ON Climate and Renewables.

Peter Lynt, a Northeastern alumnus who is general manager of global process services at IBM, says overseas co-ops introduce students to international water-cooler culture, giving them practical job skills and an understanding of how cultural differences play out in the workplace.

"In a global economy, this is crucial to learn," says Mr. Lynt, who helps place Northeastern students at IBM facilities around the world. "This international co-op experience will put these students a step ahead of their competition in a global business world."

OUTSIDE THE COMFORT ZONE

Still, Ms. Rosenfeld, the university's international-co-op coordinator, acknowledges that such an intense experience isn't for everyone. "Not everyone has the ability to be OK being the one and only blond in a place," she says.

Mr. Aoun says faculty members

and academic counselors may encourage some students, especially underclassmen, to play it safe by steering them toward domestic work placements at first. "Frankly, it's the advisers we've got to get out of their comfort zone," he says.

Thus far, students on overseas co-ops make up only a small fraction of the number of Northeastern undergraduates who go abroad: 315 out of 2,077 in 2009-10.

Bringing foreign employers on board has also been a continuous effort, at Northeastern and elsewhere. "The term 'co-op' doesn't exist abroad," says Debbie Gulick Donohue, who runs Georgia Tech's program. "You can't even use the word, because it confuses people."

Another complication is that overseas companies, particularly in developing countries, may pay the students little or nothing at all. (Co-op participants typically earn paychecks but maintain their status as students to qualify for federal financial aid.) To ensure that no students miss out on an international



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Ximena Tovar (left) did two international co-ops through Northeastern. In one, she worked with a microlender in the Dominican Republic that provided loans to women to start small businesses.

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co-op opportunity for financial reasons, Mr. Aoun last year started the Presidential Global Scholars program, with funds from Northeastern's endowment. So far, 286 students have been awarded scholarships of up to \$6,000 to work abroad.

The financial commitment underscores how valuable Northeastern believes the foreign co-op experience to be, Mr. Aoun and others say, not just to students' careers but in the classroom.

Denis J. Sullivan, a professor of political science, says that as the university has pushed to globalize, teaching and learning have become more outward-looking. "There's been an internationalization of the curriculum across campus," says Mr. Sullivan, who has taught at Northeastern since 1989. "I'm a big fan of where we are going, especially when you think of how far we've come."

AN INTEGRATED EFFORT

The international co-op program, of course, is just a piece of that effort. Mr. Sullivan started the university's popular Dialogue of Civilizations program, rigorous short-term study-abroad courses that emphasize student engagement with the local community as well as intensive language and cultural study. (Students in a course that he led to Egypt last spring spent four hours each morning learning Arabic and afternoons in lectures with diplomats, human-rights officials, and leaders of political organizations like the Arab League.)

Northeastern is also trying to internationalize its enrollment, more aggressively recruiting overseas and seeking to admit American students whose backgrounds suggest an interest in or receptivity to a global experience (for example, those who studied a foreign language in high school), says Ronne

Patrick Turner, associate vice president for enrollment.

And it is trying to connect more closely with its alumni abroad, planning to open its sixth and seventh international alumni clubs, in Hong Kong and Singapore, this year.

Those efforts all feed off one another, Northeastern officials say: Overseas alumni and parents help place co-op students internationally. The admissions office invites alumni and students in co-ops to help represent the university at foreign-student fairs and in its global recruitment efforts. And co-op students are often the most popular people in the room at alumni receptions abroad, says Diane N. MacGillivray, senior vice president for institutional advancement.

"None of this happens in a silo," she says.

Institutions with successful global strategies understand that they cannot rely on a single approach,

says Peggy Blumenthal, executive vice president of the Institute of International Education, a non-profit organization involved in international exchanges. "They know they've got to innovate across the campus and across the curriculum."

Mr. Aoun says Northeastern's global co-op model has begun to attract international partners interested in providing their students with overseas experiential-learning opportunities.

The university is also working to expand the international-business-degree approach to other disciplines, to give more students the chance to marry study and work abroad.

"We want to push this model as far as it can go—the globe's the limit," Mr. Aoun says. "Who knows, for my successor, it may be the universe."