Direct Enrollment: Advice for Students

PIC offers an open study abroad policy which allows students to select a program that best meets their academic, personal and professional goals. In some cases, this results in students finding programs that we are unfamiliar with. While we encourage students to pursue these opportunities, below are suggestions of things to be mindful of before making a financial commitment to a program.

**What is direct enrollment?**

Direct enrollment reflects non-GVSU study abroad opportunities where students work directly with a host institution/University in another country to earn academic credit.

**Standards**

It is the role of PIC to review all host university credentials to ensure the institution meets standards for GVSU to recognize the credit upon completion of the program. All study abroad programs must meet one of the following criteria:

1. The institution awarding credit must be recognized by the Ministry of Education in the host country.
2. The institution awarding credit must be an accredited US University.
3. The program must be sponsored by a U.S. or non-U.S. organization or consortium that is accredited or recognized by the Ministry of Education.
4. The credits earned at the non-U.S. institution, which is not part of the official higher education system in the host country, will be accepted for transfer credit at GVSU with PIC, and unit head or dean approval.

If the program you wish to participate in does not satisfy one of the above criteria, it will not be approved. If you are not sure if the program meets the criteria above, email Rebecca Hambleton at hambletr@gvsu.edu for assistance. It is important to understand that this approval process only reviews the academic qualifications of a program. The review does not extend to availability of student support services that may be equally important to participants.

**Questions to Consider**

1 – **What information have you found in your research that offers insight into the academic quality, student support services, and credibility of the institution?**

Have you checked:

* Online reviews?
* Past participants feedback or suggestions?
* Other U.S. institutions that have sent students through the program who may be more familiar with the program quality?
* Better Business Bureau reports for organizations that are US based.
* Are you relying only on the information provided by the organization itself or are you also referencing external reviews for program quality?
* What are the refund policies? Are these policies provided in writing?

2 –**Questions you might want to ask past participants include, but should not be limited to:**

* Did the host institution provide an orientation to help students get settled in?
* Was the academic program challenging?
* Were staff members available to assist you with important issues such as: immigration concerns, health issues, housing questions, registration for classes, academic concerns, cultural differences, introduction to the area, safety issues, etc.
* Did you receive responses to your questions in a timely manner? If not, was that due to lack of staffing at the host institution or differences in cultural norms?
* Did you encounter any problems or concerns that you think future participants should know about?
* What advice would you give future participants to help them better prepare for this program?
* Would you recommend this program to other students?

3 **– Does the institution have information easily accessible to future students on the following:**

* Application procedures
* Pre-arrival instructions or guide
* Housing options available
* Course information
* On-site support that will be available to international students

4- **Get confirmation in writing of what the program costs are and what is included in the program fee. If the information you receive is not specific, ask for additional information in writing. Also, as indicated previously, make sure you know the refund policy. If you withdraw, what are the penalties?**

5- **Ask the institution about other costs you should be aware of such as:**

* How much will it cost to get from the airport to the institution?
* What are the average costs for meals for a week?
* If housing is arranged through the institution, are utilities included? Bedding? Furniture? Is a deposit required? Are you required to sign a contract for the housing? What are the penalties if you decide to move before your contract is finished? Is there any way you can get out of your contract?
* Is there a resident permit requirement? Some countries require visitors to register with local authorities for a residence permit. There are often costs involved with this. Make sure you understand the immigration rules before you arrive. Ask if there is someone at the host institution who works directly with international students on immigration questions.
* Are you required to purchase national health insurance that will cover health care costs in the host country?

6- **Build an understanding of the culture and the differences in educational and administrative practices. It is natural for people to want to compare their overseas experience with their experience in the United States. Education systems and institutional structures vary greatly all around the world. Many students learn that other institutions place a much greater emphasis on the student to be self-sufficient in figuring out what needs to be done. This can surprise students once they arrive and often leads to a higher level of frustration on the part of the student until they learn to adapt to the local culture.**

7 – **Students who choose to direct-enroll in an institution abroad may experience more unexpected situations or concerns, especially during the first few weeks. Past participants have reported concerns such as:**

* Lack of transparency from the host institution on what exactly is included in the program cost.
* Difficulty getting course information such as: courses available to international students, course descriptions, syllabi, class schedules, etc.
* Limited on-site orientation. Orientations should include an introduction to campus, registration policies, immigration policies, housing information, cultural norms and expectations, classroom expectations, safety and security information, campus resources or local resources such as: health clinic, food markets, academic resources, etc. Many institutions do not offer a comprehensive orientation when students arrive. In many instances, students may simply be required to attend one meeting. Be prepared to ask questions if information is not presented to you. PIC offers a checklist of questions to ask during your on-site orientation.
* Confusion with arrival instructions. Where do you go to check-in? What is the process for finalizing registration? Do you need to register with local authorities? If so, do you need documents from the host institution?
* Delays in communication
* Language and cultural differences
* Information on how to pay fees to the host institution may not be transparent. They will likely not take credit card payments, so you will have to plan accordingly to make sure your fees are

paid in full by the payment deadline.

8 **– Wire transfers. You may be asked to wire transfer funds to cover your in-country expenses such as: tuition, housing, etc.**

Be certain that you have complete bank information before requesting the wire transfer. If you do not have the correct information, your funds may not be wired into the correct account, or the funds may be held for many weeks. If you have time to do so, it may be wise to wire a small amount initially to be certain your funds reach the correct account. You can then wire the remaining funds with greater confidence that the information you received from the program is correct.

This can cause real problems if you are wiring thousands of dollars.

All International Wire Transfers must have a Bank Identification code (BIC). EU and many other banks also use an IBAN – International Bank Account Number.

**9 – Housing options. If the host institution arranges housing for you, it is important that you understand the contract and expectations before you finalize your arrangements.**

* If the host institution arranges homestays, how are the families screened?
* What are the families expected to arrange for you during your stay?
	+ Laundry access – are you expected to do your laundry or will this be taken care of by someone in the household. Some families may not be comfortable with students using the equipment, so they may insist on doing this for you.
	+ Will they clean your room? Are you comfortable with other people having regular access to your space?
	+ What is the payment schedule? Are you required to pay the entire amount for your housing up-front or weekly or monthly? If you are required to pay up-front for the entire semester, if you decide to move, there could be problems with getting a refund.
	+ How far from campus might you be placed? Are you okay with being placed at any distance? Students may not have a choice to be relocated to a closer residence. There are likely to be limited housing placements near the campus. It is common for students to have to commute to get to the institution.
	+ If you are located further from campus, what are your options to get to and from the host institution for classes and activities?
	+ If a problem arises with your homestay, will you have the choice of moving? How would these issues be handled? Some organizations will move students at their request without delay. Most organizations will likely attempt to mediate between the student and the family to see if misunderstandings can be remedied. Most homestay experiences are very positive, however, there are instances each year when students do not click with their homestay placement. Think carefully about your expectations and level of flexibility before agreeing to a homestay placement. It is important to understand the delicate balance the host institution has with balancing the family’s interests with the interests of the student. In many cases, local families may rely on the income they receive from hosting international students. If you decide to move, it may be a loss of income for the host family. This can often lead to tension between the family, the host institution, and the student. This become especially challenging when you reason for wanting to move is related to challenges in adapting to the local expectations. Many programs may want to see you stick it out and learn to adapt.
	+ Most homestays include meals with the family. Think about your expectations and your normal habits. Some cultures prepare very large meals every day, other cultures prepare more modest meals. If you are accustomed to eating large meals, you may find that you will either need to eat less or supplement your meals with food you purchase on your own.

**With many unknown variables, why do students choose to direct enroll in an overseas institution?**

* You have access to many more destinations around the world.
* You have access to institutions offering a range of academic offerings that meet your personal and professional interest. There are some incredible and inspiring academic opportunities that can enhance your academic focus at GVSU.
* Learn to be resourceful and independent. Many institutions offering a direct enrollment option will not offer an extensive support system. While some may see this as a disadvantage, we would argue that it offers an incredibly rewarding opportunity for students to learn to be independent and navigate a new environment. The vast majority of students who choose to direct enroll do so with success. They often report frustrations with getting detailed information in a timely manner; however, the majority of students report that with patience and persistence, things usually come together.
* Inexpensive. In many cases, you may not be paying for a lot of extras such as: excursions, on-site support staff, airport greetings, social events, etc. which will reduce the total cost. Students who are willing to organize much of this on their own can save a lot of money.

*Note: It is important to keep in mind that if you do not have the intimate knowledge of a particular place or reliable local contacts, you may be at risk for overpaying for some services until you learn the appropriate local cost, and good negotiation skills. Do not be hard on yourself if you find you paid too much. It is all part of the learning experience.*