NO QUESTION ABOUT IT. Study abroad has changed dramatically in recent years. Just ask Rebecca Bergren, director of the College’s Off-Campus Studies office.

When Bergren was an undergraduate looking to head overseas in the mid-1980s, her university offered one option: London. Today, she oversees nearly 90 different programs that offer enough geographical and academic variety to tempt even the most reluctant armchair traveler. National cinema in Scandinavia? Music in Austria? Student teaching in London? Computers science in Hungary? Gender and the environment in Mexico? Not that the Gettysburg campus seems to harbor many intrepid travelers. Nationally, only about two percent of all undergraduates study overseas, but here that figure is whopping 50 percent—and this at an institution that doesn’t require students to study overseas. Only language majors and globalization studies majors are required to study overseas.

“The point and goal” of the College’s numerous study abroad options, Bergren said, “is for students to be able to choose to stay here for eight semesters or go abroad for one year without incurring additional expenses or dealing with a potential loss of credit.”

Proponents of study abroad cite benefits ranging from an ability to succeed in a global workforce to an increased understanding of the world. Then there are “the little things that are big things,” Bergren said, such as “learning to fend for oneself, making decisions on one’s own, learning to be flexible—skill sets that students develop if they didn’t have them before they went, they certainly have them when they come back.”

A large part of Bergren’s job is “shepherding students — and their parents — through the thicket of study abroad options.” “We have programs for all types of students,” Bergren said. “For some students, volunteering in the local community is the right thing. For other...
students, a small, faculty-taught, English-speaking program is right. A student, regardless of the program chosen, can have a transforming experience.

Once a program is selected, Bergren’s goal is for parents to step back and let students take the lead as much as possible — because soon they will be practicing independence, the better equipped they’ll be when it’s time to leave.

Know before you go
While some students know from the get-go they want to head overseas, others stumble into it. “Study abroad was part of my plan before I even knew what college I planned to attend,” Andrea Lipkin ’05 said. Being one of the College’s top athletes didn’t deter her. “She chose Australia partly because ‘I wanted to go somewhere far away where I would be out of my comfort zone.”

Stephanie Bonnes ’07, who complet-ed study abroad programs in South Africa and Egypt, had only the vaguest notions about study abroad until her sophomore year when she started hanging around Bergren’s office, where a friend worked. Now Bonnes can imagine her future without an interna-tional component to it.

That doesn’t mean she wasn’t “ner-vous and scared” before heading to South Africa — and a little resentful that she had to leave in July and could- n’t spend the summer earning money. Those feelings evaporated when she “got there,” Bonnes said, who claimed not to have experienced any real homesickness while overseas.

Students attend a mandatory orienta-tion the semester before they leave. A video “outlines all the challenges stu-dents are likely to face,” Bergren said, including “risk and security issues, health issues, pickpocketing.” The point is not to scare students but to have them “begin to appreciate they’re going somewhere new — a different cultural environment than they’re used to.”

The American abroad
Even an English-speaking country can give students the culturally different experience they seek. Barbara Lipkin wrote of daughter Andrea: “She thought the English-speaking country would be a plus until she sat down during her first meal and didn’t under-stand anything her Aussie peers were saying”.

Andrea Lipkin also found the Australian system of education challeng-ing initially. “In Australia, students are not constantly assessed with quizzes and papers as we are in the States,” she noted. “For the majority of my classes, I only had a final paper and final exam. I found all of that outweighed for the final grade in the course.”

Surprises come in an endless array. Sometimes it’s the really simple things that startle students. Bergren described this scenario: “They land, they can’t figure out how to flush the toilets, and they think, ‘What have I done?’” Students encounter new foods and drink, greetings and gestures, and languages that can take on completely different flavors than what one studied. Brady Lucerno ’09, who spent a summer in Argentina during high school, thought language wouldn’t be much of a barrier in Chile. “I felt good about my Spanish before I left for Chile,” he says, “but Chilean Spanish felt like a new language. The dialect is chockfull of idioms, slang, and a dif-ferent way of speaking. It took me a whole month to understand a full conversation with my 23-year-old host brother.”

Whatever rich cultural stew stu-dents find themselves swimming in, they all begin to question the notion of their American identity. Students studying overseas often find them-selves in the role of representing — and speaking for — the United States. “It’s a role they quickly take on with success,” Bergren said. Students over-seas “may be called upon to explain our system of government in general. If they’re not sure, they find out because they want to appear knowledgeable and articulate.”

Activities abroad
Students like Shaina Wright ’08, who volunteered in a South African health clinic, and Stephanie Bonnes, who taught English to refugees in Cairo, represent a new breed of study abroad student.

“More students want to incorporate service, volunteerism, or work experi-ence into their international experi-ence,” Bergren said. “We want them to make the same decisions around their interests overseas that they do while on campus.”

Interestingly, that means that aca-demic and outside interests coalesce.

Cindy Wright says that a research paper on HIV/AIDS helped spark her daughter’s desire to go study in Africa. While there, her daughter helped do fund raising for an AIDS clinic. In preparing a PowerPoint presentation, Shaina interviewed many people with AIDS. “That experience had a profound effect on her daughter,” Wright said. “She came back so politically charged after directly working with people with AIDS and seeing how they live and are stigmatized.”

During her first study-abroad stint, in South Africa in fall 2006, Bonnes began an oral history project based on interviews with young South Africans to gauge their views on freedom and race relations in a post-apartheid world. “It was the first time I taught something I learned in class and made a project with it on my own initiative,” she said. “So many people were willing to talk about it. She has applied for a Fulbright grant and hopes to continue the project in South Africa and in the United States.”

Bonnes’ second sabbatical overseas fell — through a new program the College created off a grant secured through the American University in Cairo — helped broaden her interest in inequality. Until then, she had focused on race rather than gender or class. “I wanted to explore gender inequality as well because of the way women are treated in Egypt and how I was treated,” she said. The constant “street harassment” she experienced throughout her visit, she said, because it “pissed me off,” showing similarities between race and gender and inequality.”

While teaching English to refugees in Egypt, Bergren presented coursework from the United States, the Sudan, and Ethiopia, every Sunday night for three hours. “It was the most amazing experience I had there,” she said. “Refugees are overLooked, but with English language skills Egyptians will be forced to hire them.”

The return
When she got back from South Africa, I didn’t want to be back,” Bonnes said. “I wanted to talk about it a lot and knew people didn’t want to hear about it as much as I wanted to talk about it.”

Stories heard a continent away caused similar feelings in Brady Lucerno. His research project on Las Madres de PlazadeMayo brought him into contact with mothers whose chil-dren were among the thousands who “disappeared” under the Pinochet regime in the 1970s. “I met incredibly strong and resilient women who expe-rienced unspeakable truths,” he said.

Even Lucerno’s adviser had been imprisoned and tortured for four years under Pinochet. “He opened up to me and helped me understand the depth of pain and suffering and the personal commitment to a more just world,” Lucerno said. “But coming home was different. How would people under-stand what I had been through? It’s not easy to wake up every day knowing you had not had to experience. This is a new feeling, but it is not always contagious to my friends and family around me.”

That’s when Bergren tries to swoop in after students return. “I have the joy of connecting them with people on campus that they wouldn’t have sought out if they hadn’t studied abroad. I’d say it’s the most rewarding part of my job,” she said. “Students come to me, saying, ‘What are your classes? What are you excited about?’ When students readjust, she said, the transitional feeling can be normal and remarkable. Parents invariably see a ‘more self-confident’ student staying in touch and alarming family can be tricky, especially for families who are close and used to trouble-shooting. Students, as they adjust to a new many of the things they returning students, “What are your classes? What are you excited about?”

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Taking on the world

Overseas programs aren’t the only academic connections Gettysburg students and faculty have to the world. Last year the College introduced a new multidisciplinary major, globalization studies, which examines different geographic regions through integrated perspectives from the humanities, arts, social sciences, and natural sciences.

“This major is somewhat different from other majors in that students have to make a detailed application to become a part of the program,” said political science Prof. Caroline Hartzell, who serves as coordinator for globalization studies. The application process includes a six-page form for students to fill out, but the somewhat lengthy process hasn’t deterred many. “We already have 35 or 36 declared majors,” Hartzell said, “and by the end of the year we expect to have as many as 50.”

To complete the major, students take both methods classes and courses with a regional and comparative focus. The intent, Hartzell said, is “to ground students in the realities of a geographic region outside the United States. With these courses, students can concentrate on such issues as public health, human rights, or migration studies.”

Students can choose to focus their regional courses on Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, or — thanks to a new program in Cairo, Egypt — the Middle East. “The program in Cairo is especially exciting,” said Rebecca Bergren, director of off-campus studies. “It is affiliated with the American University in Cairo, and students can take courses in any field there. Four students have already participated in the program, and two more are there now.”

Students readily agree that the Cairo program is exciting. “Living in Egypt was the most eye opening and challenging experience I have ever had,” Zachary Miller ’08 said after returning to the United States. “Living in a country that seemingly has no formal rules truly gave me a different perspective on how life can be lived. I wouldn’t give that knowledge up for anything.”

Combined with the overseas study program at the American University in Cairo (AUC) are faculty initiatives that are especially interesting, Hartzell said. “Last year we sent five faculty members there to learn about the Middle East and how they can incorporate content on the Arab world into their classes. Eight or nine other professors will travel to AUC this year.”

The College is also looking at other ways to broaden the contact with AUC. “This past November President Katherine Will, Provost Janet Riggs, and I traveled to Cairo to discuss with administrators at AUC the possibility of student and faculty exchanges,” said Bergren. “We are also talking about bringing Egyptian students to our campus to assist with the teaching of Arabic.”

Of course, the program in Cairo is only one region where students majoring in globalization studies can pursue a broader understanding of the world. As Hartzell pointed out, “We have students who recently returned from sites in Uganda, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Japan. They have been sharing the results of their research projects, volunteer work, and other learning experiences with students getting ready to leave for Morocco, South Africa, and China. It’s really exciting to think of Gettysburg College as the hub of a global village for our students.”

Andrea Lipkin is among nearly a dozen young alumni whose positive experiences overseas have propelled them into careers in international education. Since August 2005 she has been a study abroad adviser at Brown University; her portfolio includes Latin America, Spain, Oceania, and the Caribbean. She is also pursuing an M.S. in college student personnel at the University of Rhode Island. After her study abroad experience, she says, her career plans solidified: “I knew I wanted to help other students toward this life-changing experience.”

Other students find that their overseas experience points them in a definite direction as well. For Stephanie Bonnes, that means getting back overseas to work. Besides the Fulbright, she has applied to teach English in Japan and to be a junior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, D.C.

Shaina Wright is applying to graduate programs that incorporate Peace Corps experience: first there’s course work statewide, followed by two years in the Peace Corps, with the thesis to wrap things up.

Ashley Bone’s stint in West Africa helped her zero in on public health after visiting a group doing malaria research. “It’s heart-breaking,” she said, “people coming down with malaria like an everyday thing. ‘Oh, so-and-so’s aunt died today. She had malaria.’ Bone plans to work one or two years before pursuing an M.P.H. or an M.D./M.P.H. degree program.

Bergren thrives off the energy and ambition she sees in returning students. “Their expectations for their future and what they want to accomplish with their time left on campus are enormous,” she said. “Every returning student has so many stories to tell.”

Jackie Zakrewsky ’86 is a freelance writer; she lives in Silver Spring, Md.