

Taking Advantage of the Strong U.S. Dollar, Americans Flock to Study-Abroad Programs

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THE STRENGTH of the U.S. dollar overseas, particularly in Europe, is contributing to a surge of interest by Americans in studying abroad, and in large enrollment gains for summer programs.

The dollar is now stronger than it has been in 15 years against the currencies of France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain. As a result, several organizations and companies that operate academic programs overseas report enrollment increases of as much as 30 percent over last year for their summer offerings in Europe.

In recent years, a strong American economy has been cited as one of the chief reasons for the steady and substantial growth in the number of students doing academic work abroad. That, combined with a growing desire on the part of many career-minded students to acquire international knowledge and experience, contributed to a record 14.6-percent increase in the number who studied abroad in 1997-98, according to the most recent figures available from the Institute of International Education.

But a sharp rise in the purchasing power of the U.S. dollar in Europe over the past

six months seems to have caused many more American students than expected this year to sign up for a term abroad.

Enrollment is up 31 percent this year in the eight summer programs—all but two of them in Europe—offered by IES, formerly known as the Institute of European Studies. Among the 17 additional summer programs in Europe that it customizes for individual American colleges, enrollment is up 26 percent compared to last year.

"Many students stay on after a program ends to backpack through Europe for a week or more, and this year I'm sure they are thrilled about the dollar's strength and plan to maximize their time there," says Carla Slawson, vice president for marketing and recruitment at the organization. Its six-week academic programs in Europe cost \$2,400 to \$3,500, depending on location, type of housing, and number of excursions included.

Students won't be seeing any immediate price breaks on tuition and fixed program fees—those are set far in advance. But if the dollar were to remain at its current relative strength, "we could see some significant price decreases by academic 2001-2," says Michael Coveney, director of finance

at the Center for Education Abroad at Beaver College, in Glenside, Pa. "And certainly the out-of-pocket costs that students will incur are now much lower than we would have predicted."

Enrollment is up significantly for all seven summer programs—five of them in Europe—offered by the Beaver College center. "We are pleasantly up for summer—about 12 percent compared to last year," says Mr. Coveney. A total of approximately 235 students have enrolled.

GAINING AGAINST THE EURO

The dollar has steadily gained against the euro from the time Europe's common currency was adopted. In January 1999 this year alone, the dollar has gained 12 percent against the euro. The 11 countries that adopted the euro are Austria, Belgium, Germany, Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain.

Euro coins and bills will not be in circulation until 2002, but any transaction not involving cash may now be done in euros. Traveler's checks are issued in euros, and credit-card charges are calculated in them. While separate national currencies remain

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in use in the 11 countries, they essentially are denominations of the euro.

Even against the British pound, which is not linked to the euro, the dollar has risen 11.2 percent since January. The pound this spring dropped to the lowest levels against the dollar in the past six years.

European tourism officials say they expect the number of American visitors over all to be up 3.5 percent for the year. For study-abroad programs, the increases are expected to be significantly higher.

'BIG GROWTH IN ENROLLMENT'

Academic Programs International, a Texas company that operates a total of 10 summer programs in France, Italy, and Spain, has seen enrollment for this summer jump 30 percent. "I'm not sure if it's the strengthening of the dollar or simply that a lot more students are now deciding to study abroad, but we have definitely seen big growth in enrollment," says Jennifer Allen, the program director.

The company expects to enroll a total of more than 650 students in its programs over the coming year, an increase of 30 percent over last year. Ms. Allen says enrollment for the fall semester is already 30 percent more than last year, and she says the increase may top 38 percent by the time registration ends this month. Spring, not fall or summer, is usually the busiest academic term for study-abroad programs.

With the dollar surging against other currencies, more and more Americans, such as this group in Toledo, Spain, are studying abroad.



IES SALAMANCA

"Our applications for fall are way up," says William Cressey, vice president of the Council on International Educational Exchange, which operates programs around the world. Fall applications, over all, are up 19 percent from last year, but in Europe the increases are even higher. Enrollment in the council's program in Amsterdam has gone from 32 students last fall to 58 this fall; in Paris, from 38 to 56; and in Rennes, France, from 19 to 37.

The University of California's Education

Abroad Program has seen double-digit annual enrollment increases in recent years and has planned accordingly. But officials there are still surprised by some of the enrollment projections for the year ahead. "The numbers we now expect for the coming year will be even a little higher than what we had forecast," says Robert Rothbard, the program's associate director for finance.

John Marcum, director of the program, which is based at the University of Califor-

nia at Santa Barbara but serves the whole U.C. system, says the strong U.S. economy is helping the study-abroad program maintain the institution's ethnic and racial diversity.

"We want the population of U.C. students going abroad to reflect our student body, and these strong economic factors are very enabling for many students," he explains. "It means that families don't have to scrimp quite so much. That's obviously especially true for students of lower socioeconomic means. It makes this kind of opportunity possible."

David M. Gray, director for overseas operations of the Institute for Study Abroad, at Butler University, in Indianapolis, says that based on his program's long experience, "a substantial strengthening of the dollar in the 10-to-20-percent range will usually result in an increase of 5 to 10 percent in enrollment."

The program at Butler has only one summer offering, in Argentina—where it actually will be wintertime—but sends a total of about 2,000 students abroad during the academic year, to 70 universities around the world.

"Some programs in Europe might start running up against capacity if the dollar remains this strong," Mr. Gray says. "We have had reports from some of our suppliers who provide housing for short-term programs that they are really being stretched this summer." —PAUL DESRUISSEAU