In an increasingly interconnected world, studying the legal systems of other cultures helps us to develop informed opinions as both citizens and professionals. Today, study abroad experiences are becoming an integral part of legal education for students seeking this broader world view.

In his role as Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, Professor Eric Gouvin oversees the School of Law’s study abroad programming, helping to match students’ interests with the growing number of study abroad programs.

While recognizing the potential value foreign study offers to students looking to do international work, Dean Gouvin feels the benefits for personal development should be the primary goal of such educational experiences. He says, “Whether study abroad has any impact on a person’s résumé should be, I think, a secondary consideration. The main benefit is that people who study abroad learn a lot about themselves, other cultures, and our place in the world.”

**Passport to Paris**

For the past three years, Dean Gouvin, who has previously taught in Lithuania, has been a participant in the study abroad experience himself, teaching a course in Comparative Corporate Law at the University of Paris X (Nanterre). The course was part of the Summer Abroad program cosponsored by the University of Paris and Golden Gate University School of Law.

In 2007 Marcy Spratt 3L attended the Paris program along with other law students from the School of Law. Before buckling down to their courses in European Law, French Law, and Comparative Law electives, Marcy and several classmates spent two weeks traveling throughout Europe.

Marcy’s Paris classmates were a mix of Western New England College students, other Americans, and French law students. Classes in Comparative Law were cotaught in English by Dean Gouvin and French Adjunct Professor Thierry Aballéa, a partner in the Paris law firm LMBE.

For Marcy, the coteaching model brought in a new classroom dynamic. “It was great to listen to the exchanges between Prof. Gouvin and Prof. Aballéa and get both perspectives.”

So how does the French law school experience differ from an average day at the Blake Law Center? From the teaching perspective, Dean Gouvin observes, “University instruction is not as interactive in the way Americans would expect it to be. It’s more focused on information transfer as opposed to exploring the concepts and trying to find that ‘ah ha’ moment. My French colleague once commented on my teaching saying, ‘you (Gouvin) always say to the students ‘good question,’ but in France professors never say that—they say, ‘don’t ask questions—go figure it out yourself.’”
In addition to lectures, the Paris program routinely hosts panels featuring invited legal speakers from academia, government, NGOs, and private practice. Says Marcy, “We would typically have an hour presentation and a half hour question and answer session followed by an afternoon reception—with wine and cheese, of course.”

But Paris isn’t the only stop on the growing list of international destinations. Like many of her peers, Marcy appreciates the broad opportunities open to Western New England College law students interested in international experiences. “It’s virtually unlimited. We have a special relationship with the Paris program because of Dean Gouvin, but we certainly aren’t discouraged from trying different programs. Other people have gone to Egypt, Ireland, and Holland.”

In today’s economic climate, Marcy feels it was wise to study abroad between her first and second years, leaving her final summer open to concentrating on résumé-building experiences and developing valuable professional contacts.

Marcy advises future travelers to move quickly once they determine where they want to study. She recommends, “Programs fill up quickly today, so as soon as you know where you want to go you should call the sponsoring school to confirm openings, get your paperwork completed for the Associate Dean to approve, and be ready to apply.”

**Next Stop—Amsterdam**

For a different perspective on the growing field of sexual orientation and the law, Molly Ryan Strehorn 3L chose to study in a country that pioneered same-sex marriage—the Netherlands.

“Gay marriage is such a huge issue in the U.S. but they’ve been dealing with it for much longer in Europe,” observed Molly. “They have been doing surveys and analysis for some time and following the culture.”

Through a program offered by Whittier College, Molly studied in Amsterdam with the extra bonus of bringing her husband and young son along. Molly serendipitously found a home that needed cat-sitters for her five-week program and enjoyed the benefits of full cultural immersion—family style.

“We had the real experience of living in a neighborhood—we went to parks and we biked everywhere. We enjoyed just being in the culture.”

Like many study abroad programs, Molly’s five courses at the University of Amsterdam Law School attracted diverse faculty and guest speakers from around the world including some of the leading minds on the front lines of the emerging and constantly evolving area of impact litigation.

“The program was just incredible because of the quality of the faculty. One professor was Jenny Pizer, who is Senior Counsel and Marriage Project Director for Lambda Legal. After we got home, I saw that she had won a huge case in California ([Benitez v. North Coast Women’s Care Medical Group](https://www.law.wnec.edu)). It was amazing that I could actually send her an email and say, ‘Congratulations.’”

To Molly’s great satisfaction among the experts discussed in her courses was our own Professor Jennifer Levi. “It was great to be in Amsterdam and get assigned an article that was written by one of our faculty members. Jennifer Levi is truly world renowned for her work.”

During her stay, Molly visited The Hague at a time when she was not just a student of history, but a witness to it. “We went to The Hague as a group and it was incredible. It was when Radovan Karadzic was brought to trial—it was like a fever in the Netherlands. The class speaker who gave us the tour of the criminal court was the court liaison for him, so she talked about her experience, and two days later I turned on the TV and there she was on the BBC reading the indictment.”

Molly credits the experience not only with broadening her awareness of other legal cultures, but in widening her understanding of the communities she hopes to serve someday.

“We had two transgender students who were absolutely brilliant, and it also showed the diversity within the community. You could have someone who identifies as a gay white male who has had experience in the military and is pro waterboarding. I had this assumption that was very
narrow-minded that being liberal in one area meant being liberal in other areas. To have those conversations was really dynamic and exciting.

**Autumn in London**

In addition to summer study abroad programs, students may also study for a semester abroad with the permission of the Associate Dean. Says Dean Gouvin: “Our academic rules provide two different standards for the approval of requests to visit at another law school. For summer programs the standard is very lenient, basically if the program is on the ABA’s approved list of study abroad programs, the Associate Dean should approve the request to visit. For requests to visit during the school year, however, the standard is much more difficult to meet. In that situation the student must demonstrate that another school offers a course of study (not just some courses) that we will not offer and that the curriculum offered is critical to the attainment of the student’s professional objectives.”

After experiencing summer abroad study in Paris and Shanghai respectively, students Jason Trimmer 3L and Lindsay Jones 3L chose to dedicate an entire semester to international study with the added benefit of an internship component. They studied in the Autumn in London program cosponsored by the University of Tulsa and Stetson University College of Law.

Jason, who aspires to work in foreign policy, interned eight hours a week at Davies Arnold Cooper, an international law firm renowned for dispute resolution and real estate expertise. Lindsay, who plans to work in international law, chose a more intensive internship and worked 20 hours a week for award-winning international lawyer Mahnaz Malik.

“If you want to study abroad for a whole semester there are very few ABA approved programs,” says Jason who believes such an extended stay offers an ideal way to immerse oneself in another culture. “The cultural experience just adds so much to the legal experience that you receive.”

He recommends the Autumn in London program because “London is the central legal system for the UK so you have the opportunity to sit in on trials at the Old Bailey if you’re into criminal law, and you can go to the Royal Courts of Justice for civil and you can watch Parliament.”

While Lindsay felt her China summer study experience was very insular, with limited student interaction with the legal community and general population, she was pleased that her UK experience was just the opposite. She said, “In the London program, you learn a lot about the cultural differences of being a lawyer in the UK versus being a lawyer in the U.S.”

Appreciative of such opportunities to compare and contrast other legal systems with our own, Lindsay offers, “International study puts things more in perspectives. It’s a window into seeing how the other side sees you and how they see the rest of the world.”

(Above) Jason Trimmer 3L stands guard at the palace, and (right) at Stonehenge with Lindsay Jones 3L