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COLUMN: International programs transform lives

*By Mark Nook
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October means Homecoming at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, and this year brings a very special reason to celebrate -- the 40th anniversary of our study abroad programs.

UWSP is a university that transforms the lives of its students, and life-changing experiences happen with no greater frequency than in our array of international programs, now spanning the entire globe and running throughout the year.

When a group of Pointers and their professors boarded a flight to London in 1969 for our very first organized semester abroad, they didn't realize the trail they were about to blaze. The value of hands-on learning in the world, and bringing those experiences back to campus and applying them to the careers and family lives that would follow, was evident right away and caught hold across campus.

Today, UWSP proudly leads the entire University of Wisconsin System in the percentage of our graduates who have studied abroad. In fact, we rank in the top 20 nationally in this category.

Homecoming festivities on Oct. 10 will feature a reunion of Pointers who studied abroad during their time with us. All told, that's about 13,000 people.

Of course, most of those alumni have stayed close over the years. The bonds formed during study-abroad experiences are strong, indeed. Take that 1969 London trip, for instance. Five marriages came from within the group. Anytime the calendar brings a fifth Friday in a month, those alumni get together for a fish fry. They've shared the births and weddings of their children and grandchildren. They've also shared a pursuit of further global experiences and perspectives on the world that have enriched their own careers immeasurably, whether they've made their lives here in central Wisconsin or elsewhere.

Study abroad through UWSP's International Programs Office also draws students from other universities who want to take advantage of the opportunities our university can provide. Among our programs underway right now is a semester at Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland. A group of students from Chicago's DePaul University joined our Pointers for this immersion into Eastern European culture and history. If you're a Facebook user, visit the UWSP Krakow Semester Abroad

2009 group and watch this fall as our students post their pictures and accounts of their experience in real time. You will also notice several other stories of our study abroad success on the university Web site at www.uwsp.edu.

The need for global awareness has never been greater. UWSP's study abroad success through our International Programs Office is yet another example of the foresight that has been a hallmark of the leadership of our university, year in and year out.

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