The college’s popular Global Studies program prepares students for the dynamic of globalization

At a time when the value of a liberal arts education is under attack by higher education critics clamoring for a more narrowly focused, even vocational approach to college, Lehigh University’s Global Studies program has taken a divergent approach, exposing students to different disciplines and perspectives to prepare them for an increasingly complex, interconnected world.

“We’re really going the other way,” says Bruce Whitehouse, associate professor of anthropology and director of the Global Studies program. “We’re looking to expose our students to a very broad cross-section of issues and literatures and methodologies. The idea is that cross-training in these different disciplines is actually going to make them stronger candidates for positions later in life when they are faced with complex social environments and business environments and they need to be able to work across cultural divisions and geographical space.

“Our idea is they’re going to need lots of different tools in their toolkit, and it’s not sufficient to have just political science training or anthropological training or whatever discipline it is—no one of them is really going to be adequate to form the kinds of leaders we’re trying to prepare.”

Launched just as the Great Recession hit in 2008 and running counter to the prevailing academic winds, Global Studies has enjoyed striking success, both in attracting students and sending graduates into almost every sector of the economy.

“We did not plan for this to be a big major. It’s just remarkable how quickly it grew,” says Jack Lule, professor and chair of the journalism and communication department who served as director of the Global Studies program from its launch until last year, when Whitehouse took the reins. “To me, it’s just a real testimony to this generation. They get global. They get interdisciplinary.”

When the College of Arts and Sciences built the program, the students came, as the number of Global Studies majors mushroomed from 41 in 2010 to 101 in 2014 (which included a graduating class of 41). And while about 20 percent of the roughly 150 graduates to date have gone directly to graduate school, the other 80 percent are now working in a wide array of jobs in the private sector, nonprofits, NGOs and government.

“If you asked me for a portrait of a typical Global Studies graduate, I can’t give it to you because they’re just going in too many different directions,” Whitehouse says.

“I don’t know if there’s a spectrum of the job market they’re not in now,” adds Lule.

The Global Studies program grew out of the Globalization and Social Change Initiative, a research initiative that “bubbled up from the faculty” in 2006 around recognition that globalization was “changing everything we’re doing, even the very nature of education,” says Lule, who was one of the faculty members spearheading the initiative.

The creation of the Global Studies major followed quickly, and it has been demanding from the outset. In addition to the Introduction to Global Studies course, it requires a foreign language; four core courses (history, culture, political economy and politics), with a fifth core course in arts and humanities being added in the fall; 12 credits of Study Abroad; area studies, such as Africana Studies or Latin American Studies; and a senior seminar.

Yet, some 60 percent of Global Studies majors are double majors.

“That was another surprise to me,” Lule says. “I thought this was a pretty heavy major to begin with. We require a lot. But it turns out these are really organized students and they know how to manage their time.”

Lehigh does not have a foreign language requirement, but the Global Studies requirement is about to become even more stringent. From the start, Global Studies has required intermediate proficiency (basically a sophomore level) in a
foreign language offered by Lehigh. (Currently, Spanish, with 19 Global Studies majors, and French, with 13, are by far the most popular; Arabic, Chinese, German and Russian each have three Global Studies majors, and Hebrew and Japanese have one each.)

Starting in the fall, Whitehouse says, the program is “lifting the bar” to an advanced level. “We found that enough of our students were coming in with high school credits and passing out of the introductory levels,” he adds. “We want to encourage them to take that study a little further and get to the point where they’re really proficient in a language.”

The core courses, taught by a group of 10 faculty members, expose students not only to different disciplines, but the way those disciplines approach issues related to globalization. So they get a historian’s perspective in the Histories of Globalization class; an anthropologist’s perspective and experience doing sophisticated, quantitative analysis with large data sets in the political economy course; and a political scientist’s perspective in the politics course.

In recent years, the arts and humanities perspective has been offered through elective classes. (Some 50 faculty members have taught elective courses for Global Studies over the years.) But starting in the fall, it will become part of the core curriculum, adding a humanistic viewpoint to the mix.

“I think many of our students find that breadth appealing,” Whitehouse says.

That certainly was true in Kendall Wilkins’ case. “It’s very wide and diverse and really challenging to me in terms of thinking about things from a lot of different perspectives and a lot of contradicting perspectives,” says Wilkins, a junior Global Studies major who also is minoring in Economics and Latin American Studies. “Because economists and anthropologists think really differently about a lot of different processes.”

But to truly understand global, you have to go global. And that’s why the Study Abroad requirement “is an integral part of the Global Studies experience,” Whitehouse says. For most students, it means an intensive semester studying in another country, although some fulfill the requirement in other ways.

Lehigh offers a wide range of programs to complete the requirement, so students can tailor their experience to their interests, whether it’s around a particular issue (global health, international business or the environment) or a specific geographical area, language or cultural setting.

Ralph Jean-Noel, a senior of Haitian descent with a double major in Global Studies and Africana Studies, has been to Africa twice as well as to the Caribbean during his time at Lehigh. On a 10-day service trip to Antigua and Bermuda the summer after his sophomore year, he and other students helped at a recycling plant, including giving it a new coat of paint, and painted several schools. They also toured the islands and immersed themselves in the culture.

“It was a humbling experience,” he says. “I loved it, just to meet so many different people. It was my first time traveling abroad and, being of Haitian descent and my parents being from the Caribbean, it was great to go to a Caribbean nation and see the similarities between their culture and my culture.”

He and his Social Entrepreneur classmates went to Kenya over spring break last year as part of a semester-long project to help a community-based organization called the Soccer Queens develop a business venture to help sustain fundraising efforts.

He followed that up with an Iacocca Internship to Ghana, where he worked with a team of mainly engineering students for six weeks on a sustainable development project to help a local company with the initial development and marketing plan for a granular fertilizer applicator that could save low-income farmers money and considerable time.

“It was a learning process,” says Jean-Noel, who switched from a business major to Global Studies after taking the Intro to Global Studies course in his junior year. “There were moments of frustration, there were moments of growth.”

The team members managed to do marketing research and design and build a prototype within their six weeks in Ghana. But they wanted to do so much more. Among the valuable lessons Jean-Noel learned: “As hard as it’s going to be, we just need to accept the way things are. Simple things, like doing business in Ghana, are a lot different than they are here in the U.S., where a lot of things are on time and efficient and everything’s fast.”

And in Kenya, the budding social entrepreneurs grew frustrated when the innovative ideas they brought to the Soccer Queens—an organization that provides girls an alternative to life on the streets and a safe place to grow, learn and have fun—were not accepted.

But once again, he learned a valuable lesson. “We couldn’t force our ideas down their throats. It has to come from an organic place. It was a little difficult, knowing the group had so much potential and they could do a lot and we had so many great ideas. But it really was up to them to decide what they wanted to do. We had to forgo our vision and hopefully help them develop their own vision.”

Wilkins, who spent the summer after her junior year of high school in Spain and traveled to Israel following graduation, is spending this semester in Valparaiso, Chile. She is living with a host family and taking advanced courses in oral and written Spanish, as well as learning about the culture, history, politics and economics of Chile.

“I was really intentional about choosing a program where I could interact with the people there,” she says. “That’s the thing I really want to be able to do. I want to hear people’s stories and what their life is like and what those pieces of history that we know about here in the U.S. have been like for them. I want to build relationships and friendships cross-culturally that I’ll remember for the rest of my life.”
The experiences living, studying and working abroad of Wilkins, Jean-Noel and other Global Studies majors is one of the things that makes them so attractive to prospective employers, Lule says. “They’re culturally competent. And what workforce doesn’t want someone who’s used to working with people from different cultures and different backgrounds? These kids have lived that already.”

After graduation in May, Jean-Noel plans to work for a year while he decides on the graduate school path he wants to take. He is thinking about getting a Ph.D. in the long run.

“I may not know exactly what’s next, but I feel like what I have learned in the past year has prepared me and made me realize that the opportunities are limitless,” he says. “And it has helped me shape the way I look at things and pursue things in my future.”

Wilkins, who still has another year at Lehigh, is interested in eventually working as a consultant to help businesses get into international markets, drawing on the knowledge and experience she has acquired in dealing with potential cultural and language barriers.

“I definitely feel like I’ve been prepared well, not only in my Global Studies classes, but by Lehigh’s curriculum and environment in general,” she says. “Learning how to learn, how to think critically—those are the kind of things I will take with me wherever I end up and that will help me be successful, I think.”

When Lehigh launched its Global Studies program, there were only a handful of successful models, among them Yale, University of Wisconsin-Madison and UCLA. Lule says he has advised colleagues at about a half dozen other universities in recent years who were interested in creating a program, and he expects the field of Global Studies to grow.

“I do believe we’re going to see more and more interdisciplinary majors and interdisciplinary programs arising within the academic environment because it makes so much sense,” Lule says. “Once people get it, once they realize that the best questions are going to be answered at the intersection of disciplines and no matter how good one discipline is—it can be economics, it can be political science, it can be journalism—it’s going to benefit more from a conversation with other disciplines. And if the students live that, they’re going to do better. So I do think that global studies is going to grow nationally, but I also think interdisciplinary majors will grow nationally.”