

Toward the Globalization of Undergraduate Education:

The Impact of Study Abroad

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Toward the end of her semester abroad in Shanghai, China, University of Southern California student Jasmine Zahedi noted:

There's so much more to China than Shanghai and Beijing. I realized that I definitely need to return to China. There's so much I haven't seen, so many cultures I haven't experienced. China's has such an interesting mix of cultures because it has small villages and huge cities. It also has a big Muslim influence in certain parts, which I find fascinating. Despite China's various levels of development, continuities of habit, religion and culture have largely remained intact. I realize I'm studying abroad in such a diverse country, most populated country in the world, and I don't want to leave (Zahedi, 2015).

This heartfelt sentiment is representative of the experience of many students worldwide who have the opportunity to study abroad for a year, a semester, or just a few weeks. This paper will review the literature regarding the history of study abroad programs, look at the experience of American students studying abroad, international students who study in the United States, and the role of technology in the globalization of education.

**History of Study Abroad Programs**

According to the Association for the study of Higher Education (ASHE), the goal of study abroad programs can be stated as “promoting world understanding; spreading the good word about the United States (culture, democracy); promoting world peace and understanding; economic competitiveness; and, depending on one’s point of view, national security or even imperialism” (ASHE, 2012a, p. 15). Colleges and universities see study abroad as an important aspect of their own internationalization. Organized study abroad can trace its origins back to the

19<sup>th</sup> century, when groups of young ladies were escorted to Europe to see the sights and learn about other cultures. During the same period, wealthy young men participated in The Grand Tour, a year abroad, to complete their education (ASHE, 2012a; Vande Berg, 2007).

In 1919, the Institute of International Education (IIE) was founded, to promote study abroad as a means of achieving lasting world peace. The IIE recommended policies to ensure quality in Junior Year Abroad programs, and encouraged universities to offer credit for study abroad as a part of their curriculum. (ASHE, 2012a).

The University of Delaware has been sending organized groups of students, with faculty supervision, to study abroad for a year since 1923. Smith College followed suit in 1925, sending the first group of women on a year-long study abroad experience in France. According to a 1928 report by Walter Hullihen, these groups of students were very enthusiastic about the educational value of their year spent studying in France, and reported greater cultural awareness as well (Hullihen, 1928; Walton, 2005).

The United States Government has encouraged student exchange with other countries, notably through the Fulbright Program, which began in 1946. The program provides for agreements with foreign countries to enter into exchange relationships with the United States. By 1964, 48 countries participated in the Fulbright Program, and over 21,000 American students and 30,000 foreign students had participated in the program (Kramer, 2009). To date, more than 325,000 Fulbright Scholars from over 155 countries have participated in the Fulbright program since its inception (IIE, 2016a).

The location of study abroad programs has evolved through the decades. Historically, study abroad opportunities were concentrated in Europe. Currently, 32% of United States study abroad students choose to study in the United Kingdom, Italy and Spain (IIE, 2016b). However,

the rising importance of China in the global economy has increased the number of students who choose to study abroad in China. These students are focused on learning the Chinese language, culture, business and technology, among other subjects (Dixon, 2013).

### **Who Studies Abroad?**

Currently, one in ten United States undergraduates participates in a study abroad program (IIE, 2016b). AHSE has studied which students are likely to study abroad and found that students who choose to study abroad are usually white, female, undergraduates enrolled at liberal arts colleges. Historically, participants were concentrated in majors in the humanities and social sciences, although this is moving toward larger percentages of participants in business and STEM. A very small percentage of community college students participates in study abroad programs. Students who choose to study abroad are usually from higher-income families (ASHE, 2012b).

Students may be motivated to choose study abroad to improve foreign language skills, obtain better employment opportunities, explore other cultures, or for pleasure. First-generation college students, who are often from minority groups, may view study abroad as frivolous or irrelevant (ASHE, 2012b). According to Open Doors (IIE, 2016b), in 2014/15, only 27% of students studying abroad belonged to minority groups.

Salisbury, Paulsen and Pascarella (2011) suggest that white students are interested in broadening their cultural experience, while minority students, who deal with cultural issues every day, are not as inclined to travel to experience another culture. This study also suggests that an increase in financial support for minority students to study abroad would likely increase minority participation in these programs (Salisbury, et al., 2011).

Students choose to study abroad based on the cost of the program, the academic and cultural components of the experience, and the popularity of the professor as well as logistical issues such as the timing and location of the study abroad program (de Jong, Schnusenberg & Goel., 2010). BaileyShea (2009) notes “Not all students face equal choices if they begin college with different family and institutional resources that facilitate or limit their educational possibilities (p. 202).

Community college students are perceived as a potential area for growth in study abroad programs. Community colleges enroll 43% of all undergraduate students, but few of these students participate in international education experiences (Zhang, 2011). Magellan Study Abroad (2014), a company that organizes immersion programs in language study, reported that there is also a movement to offer study abroad opportunities to high school students, particularly in summer language programs.

### **Study Abroad Programs for American Students**

The 2016 Open Doors report states that in the 2014/15 academic year, 313,415 United States students studied abroad for academic credit. As of the 2014/15 academic year, among United States study abroad students, 24% are STEM majors, 20% are business majors, 17% are social sciences majors, 8% are foreign language/international studies majors, and 7% are fine or applied arts majors.

IIE defines three major types of programs: short-term programs, which are usually eight weeks or less, mid-length which are a full quarter or semester long, and long-term, which are a full academic year in length. Students who are primarily interested in academic development in language, culture and personal growth are more likely to apply for a semester-long program. Other students, who might be more interested in the pleasure aspect of study abroad, such as

visiting tourist sites, are more apt to choose short-term programs. However, some students will judge the long-term experience to be more “fun” because of the higher level of freedom associated with these programs (Fitzsimmons, Flanagan and Wang, 2013). According to Open Doors (IIE, 2016b), 3% of study abroad participants attend a year-long program, 34% of study abroad participants attend a semester-long program, and 63% of study abroad participants attend a summer program or a program up to 8 weeks long. Because of the significant popularity of the short-term study abroad experience, most current literature focuses on that segment.

Sachau, Brasher and Fee (2009) describe three basic types of short-term programs: the summer semester, the study tour, and service learning trip. Each of these programs starts with a defined educational goal, which includes increasing knowledge, changing attitudes and building confidence in participants. The summer semester is generally structured as a 6 to 12 week on-campus program, with 4 days of classes and 3 days for independent travel per week. Students are housed in dorms, and have considerable exposure to guest speakers and site visits (Sachau et al., 2009).

The study tour is generally one to four weeks in length. Students travel from city to city, usually by bus, and stay in hotels. Students are often required to keep a journal to document their learning and experiences on these tours (Sachau et al., 2009).

A service-learning trip is usually two to six weeks and mixes international travel and volunteer work. These trips are coordinated with a non-governmental organization in the target country, which can provide opportunities for meaningful volunteer service for students. These experiences might include teaching, construction projects, or helping local people establish small businesses. Completion of preparatory study is important, as there is little time for reading or homework while students work on the service aspect of the program. Students are usually housed

near their service project site, and have the opportunity to live in the culture of that area during the trip (Sachau et al., 2009).

There are several advantages of these short-term programs. Students are better able to understand course concepts when they experience them directly. They also have the chance to understand the culture of the country they visit, and to have meaningful interaction with local residents. They learn about themselves, and their own lives at home (Sachau, et al., 2009). Short-term study abroad also appeals to students in very structured programs, such as social work, where most students are not able to complete a longer international program without negatively impacting their overall program of studies (Gonsalvez, 2013).

In a case study of short-term study abroad participants, students identified the importance of the “expertise of the instructors, the physical aspects of the experience, and the interpersonal and emotional connections they made through interactions with classmates, instructors and local peoples” (Coryell, 2013, p. 24). The students noted the importance of mini-lectures in the field and collaborative learning exercises. They also noted that the informal learning experiences during their free time were important to the overall learning (Coryell, 2013).

Cubillos and Ilvento (2012) studied self-efficacy in students who study abroad. They found that study abroad experiences enhance self-efficacy beliefs of participants. This effect is more pronounced in longer programs, but significant in shorter experiences as well. One key to this increased perception of self-efficacy is interaction with the local population during the program.

Many scholars are critical of short-term study abroad programs. Diane Dean, associate professor of higher education administration and policy at Illinois State University, offers a criticism that short trips abroad “perpetuate the idea of the ‘play date’ generation whose parents

have always handled the logistics of life” (Korn, 2013). One drawback of the short-term programs is that students are generally housed with other United States students, creating an “American bubble” which prevents meaningful cultural exchange (Allen, 2009; Coryell (2013).

Research has been inconclusive about the effectiveness of short-term programs in terms of language proficiency. Allen (2009) also noted that a student’s motivation for study abroad is a major factor in their achievement during the international experience. The study found that if a student’s motivation was to improve in the language, they were likely to do the work necessary to improve their language skills. However, if a student had another motivation, such as to travel or improve opportunities for future employment, they were less likely to show significant improvement in language skills (Allen, 2009).

Janes (2008) echoed a concern that short-term study abroad could easily be seen as “glorified tourism”. “Short-term study abroad must be an academic cross-cultural experience rather than a group vacation” (Eckert, Luqmani, Newell, Quraeshi & Wagner, 2013, p. 455). Care must be taken in the design process to ensure that there is academic rigor in this short course. Faculty members must be prepared for a diverse and immersive role throughout the planning, the trip itself, and afterward (Eckert et al., 2013).

Deans (2011) describes a framework for short-term study in China, which is adaptable to study in other countries. In this framework, a semester-long course in the United States is followed by two to three weeks in China. The specific dimensions of the program explore how the world is connected through business, technology and people. The students travel to several cities during the international component of the course, and visit cultural and business sites. The in-country experience reinforces and expands the knowledge gained in the semester program (Deans, 2011).

Jessup-Anger and Aragones (2013) point out the need to consider the individual characteristics of group members when designing a short-term study abroad program. For example, to include students who identify as loners in the group experience, it may be necessary to structure some meal times as group discussion assignments. It is also important to provide for group reflection to process the experience during the program.

Kamdar and Lewis (2015) suggest that to reap long-term effects, participants in short-term study abroad programs must engage in preparatory coursework, and a formalized program on their return to the United States. Kortegast and Boisfontaine (2015) noted that upon returning from short-term study abroad, most students do not take the opportunity to reflect on their experience, and do not have significant contact with the other participants in their program. The authors suggest that students would benefit from continued structured interaction opportunities with other participants after their return to the United States, to help them negotiate the meaning of their international experiences.

### **International Students in the United States**

The presence of international students is important to United States colleges and universities and to the United States economy in general (Choi, 2013). The 2016 Open Doors Report states that just over 1 million international students studied in the United States in the 2015/16 academic year (IIE, 2016b). Of these, 31.5% were from China, and 15.9% were from India. Chinese students often come to the United States to study because of the lack of capacity in China to accommodate all students who want a college education, as well as the experience of studying in the United States (Mellman, 2011).

In a study of Asian music students in the United States, the factors supporting international study included the reputation of the professors, the availability of scholarships and the reputation of the university program (Choi, 2013).

Lin and Scherz (2014) studied Asian students in the United States, and proposed strategies for university faculty to help international students be successful. International students face both linguistic and cultural challenges. Instruction should be scaffolded and learner-centered. Assignments and supplemental resources should be chosen with the needs of the international student in mind. The authors note that these practices will benefit all students, not just the international students.

Choi (2013) also found that the emotional stability of the students was a critical factor in their success, and suggested that students develop strong social networks in the host culture to assist in maintaining this stability. Students have reported stress from adjusting to every aspect of living in the United States, from the weather, to the food, to the unfamiliar people. Many students have also reported that they were homesick. These feelings were improved by leisure activities with friends and working at part-time jobs (Choi, 2013; Kwadzo, 2014).

### **After the program is over**

Wielkiewicz and Turkowski (2010) conducted a controlled study in which study abroad returnees were compared to their peers who did not study abroad. American students who study abroad have been found to have increased skepticism about their home culture, which is more pronounced in participants in longer study abroad programs. This study also found that male students over 21 self-reported an increase in their alcohol consumption after returning home. While it is often assumed that students returning from study abroad might have difficulties in their interpersonal relationships, this effect was not significantly different in the returnees and the

non-participants. The study also found that studying abroad is more stressful for women than for men. This finding presents an opportunity for future study (Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010).

Han, Stocking, Gebbie and Appelbaum (2015) found that international students completing their studies in the United States often decide to remain after graduation, especially if they are interested in careers in industry or non-governmental organizations. The opportunities in these fields are perceived as better than in their home countries. These students face challenges because they must obtain an H-1B visa to remain in the United States. This means they must be sponsored by an employer for a 5-year term, and they are not free to pursue other opportunities. The authors suggest that if the United States wants to retain these talented graduates, they will have to revise the current immigration policies.

Soon (2012) studied the decision to return home after studies abroad in New Zealand. That study found that the student's initial intention to return home, expressed prior to the program, and their family's level of support for the student's migration were important factors in staying in New Zealand or returning home. The study also found that doctoral students who completed their studies in New Zealand were less likely to return home, but were more likely to relocate to the UK or other European countries. Health science students were also less likely to return home, but many chose to relocate to the United States or Australia (Soon, 2012).

Werner (2012) studied students who completed studies in the United States and returned to their small hometown in China. These students cited family concerns and the desire to be a "big fish in a little sea," or the prestige of completing an international education, as primary reasons for this decision. Werner also noted that the younger generation in China is perceived as less ambitious than prior generations, so they are more likely to return to their familiar life at home.

Another issue for international students while adjusting to life after study in the United States is difficulty transferring learning to the culture and circumstances of their home country. Students surveyed in longitudinal studies suggested that a course in comparative policies in their field of study would have been helpful to them in their transition (Rai, 2002).

### **Technology and Globalization**

As technology evolves, new and innovative programs are being created to extend the benefits of international study to more students. For example, Florida Institute of Technology's College of Business has created a blended learning program that combines distance learning pre-work, both lectures and team-building exercises, and an abbreviated international travel experience focusing on guest lectures and site visits. This flexible approach enabled participation by older students who had too many outside responsibilities for a long international trip, as well as permitting participation from the college's distance learning students who lived in many countries worldwide. These non-traditional students are not often included in traditional study abroad programs (Slotkin, Durie & Eisenberg, 2012).

Lipinski (2013) reported on an initiative designed to bring aspects of the international study experience to a broader student audience, virtual study abroad. Middle Tennessee State University and the University of Pécs in Hungary connected their classes for one-hour blocks each week. The students interacted, with guidance from their professors, and learned about culture, employment, and the economic climate in the other country. While the experience was not as immersive as study abroad, it accomplished many of the goals of improving cross-cultural understanding.

One result of the move of universities toward globalization is the availability of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). The United States has established dominance in this market and

it will be difficult for other world universities to compete. It is difficult to determine if MOOCs will have a major impact long-term on universal access to higher education (Currie, 2014).

Some believe MOOCs have the potential to become an important aspect of the international education system. For example, India is the largest market for MOOCs outside the United States. India's MOOC users tend to be young, perhaps because there is inadequate capacity for university aged students in India, and the existing programs are often of low quality. Despite the fact that MOOCs do not offer a recognized credential for completion of studies at this time, young Indians have embraced the platforms. If such programs were combined with standardized assessments resulting in a recognized credential, they could be disruptive to higher education as we know it. This could be indicative of an opportunity for students in other developing countries (Khemka, 2016).

Wilson and Gruzd (2014) also examined the MOOC phenomenon as it relates to developing countries, and found that the three most prominent MOOC providers report developing countries as significant sources of participants. The authors suggested that there may be higher levels of interest in these areas, but access to technology in those countries may be limited. In addition, most courses are only offered in English, which eliminates some of the potential consumers of MOOC courses. As technology becomes more widespread, and MOOC providers provide content in various languages, this situation could change.

## **Conclusion**

Study abroad is promoted as a way to increase American presence in the global marketplace (ASHE, 2012a). Research shows that “cross-cultural training is imperative in our global economy” (Douglas & Jones-Rikkers, 2001, p. 57). Cross border business mergers

highlight the need for cultural understanding in a global economy. One of the best ways to develop this cross-cultural awareness is living in another country for an extended period.

Study abroad programs of three weeks or longer can help participants build confidence that they can function in the other culture. This is based on the student's ability to build relationships with persons in the country. The concept of "worldmindedness" is critical in our global economy.

"Worldminded individuals are those whose primary reference group is humankind, rather than a specific ethnic group" (p. 58). These individuals are likely to see other viewpoints as valuable, and to appreciate cultural differences (Douglas & Jones-Rikkers, 2001).

Some researchers are concerned that the continuing economic problems in the world will curtail study abroad in the future. However, students may choose shorter international experiences and less expensive destinations such as South America. Brian J. Whalen, president of the Forum on Education Abroad, notes that there is financial anxiety in the world, but families may see study abroad as an investment in their child's future success (Fischer, 2008).

There are lessons to be learned for all participants in the study abroad process. For students to reap the rewards of this international experience, faculty must carefully design programs that prepare students prior to the trip, support them during the trip, and help them reflect on their experiences (Vande Berg, 2007). Students must be aware of the importance of taking the lead when speaking to potential employers, and relating how the international experience translates into value for the potential employer. Most of all, reflection is needed to fully realize the competencies and benefits gained through a study abroad program (Gardner, Steglitz & Gross., 2009).

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