

MONTEREY INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

# Study Abroad Outcomes & Assessment

*Exploring and Identifying the Benefits of Study Abroad*

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## *Exploring and Identifying the Benefits of Study Abroad*

### Purpose

Six scholarly research papers were looked at in order to identify various specific outcomes of study abroad programs. Including ways to ensure greater success in the fostering global citizenry and Intercultural Communication through study abroad programs. Furthermore, several methods for evaluating and assessing programs will be identified and recommendations for appropriate use of each type will be given.

### Introduction

In the past study abroad programs were perceived as a luxury experience for the wealthy and there was little to no research to support its applicability in the 'real world'. Today however, with a greater abundance of research taking place and a higher emphasize the global economy and international problem solving and the need for demonstrating and reaching specific study abroad outcomes has become the subject of numerous research papers and studies. "Without concrete evidence of values and outcomes, study abroad experiences will lack the credence afforded other educational programs"(Willams 2005). Once the the desired outcomes of a study abroad program have been identified and built into the program it then becomes necessary to assess the learning outcomes and program satisfaction both as a means of improving future programs and also as a utility that can be used in furthering the field of International Education.

## Learning Outcomes from Study Abroad

### Global Citizenship

In determining various outcomes of Study Abroad programs I looked at *The Added Value of Study Abroad:Fostering a Global Citizenry* by Michael A. Tarrant, Donald L. Rubin, and Lee Stoner. The study looked at whether or not study abroad was effective at fostering Global Citizenship. In this study global citizenship was based on three key dimensions (Stoner, K. R., Tarrant, M. A., Perry, L., Stoner, L., Wearing, S., & Lyons, K. 2014):

- (a) social responsibility, (concern for others)
- (b) global awareness (understanding and appreciation of ones's self in the world and of world issues)
- (c) civic engagement(active engagement with local, regional, national, and global community issues)

In the study the idea that global citizenship can be prepared for through programs that incorporate the principles of experiential education, specifically action-oriented experiences that cause reflection, critical analysis , and synthesis is brought up and supported through an analysis of undergraduate students. The students registered for Maymester(May-June) or summer (May-July). The students were enrolled in classes that were either explicitly focused on sustainability or in classes that had no sustainability focus in the curricula. This created four groups (a) study abroad/sustainability (b) study abroad no sustainability (c) home campus/sustainability (d) home campus/non sustainability. A voluntary survey was given to the groups on the first day and the last day using a numbering system to help match the students pretest with their post test. Students scores were measured on an eight-item Environmental Citizenship Scale and analyzed using SAS 9.3.

The finding of the study were that students who studied abroad in a sustainability course exhibited the highest overall scores on 2 of the 3 dependent measures at the posttest. There was no significant difference between students studying about sustainability abroad versus students studying about sustainability on their home campuses. The combination of location and academic focus appear to yield the greatest increases in global citizenship and should be noted to programs that with wish to promote other goals such as cultural sensitivity and proficiency in cross cultural communication.

It makes sense that students do not simply learn more from being abroad, but rather a the course needs to be set-up in such a way to take full advantage of the experiential learning that can take place abroad. It is also worth noting that each program has a different instructor which makes for a very difficult variable to control for.

## Intercultural Communication

Another commonly looked at study abroad out is Intercultural Communication. The paper *Exploring the Impact of Study Abroad on Students' Intercultural Communication Skills: Adaptability and Sensitivity* examines what intercultural communication skills are and where they can best be obtained.

When talking about Intercultural Communication skills there are several notable traits that appear repeatedly in the literature. To summarize the article, the traits can best be described as flex-

ibility and open-mindedness, having a high tolerance for ambiguity, having cultural empathy and being able to react to the other's communication process through verbal and nonverbal sensitivity, and lastly the ability to be both resourceful and resilient during times of mental stress. It is easy to imagine how study abroad programs can facilitate in the development of these skills, however, as mentioned above the goal becomes to empirically demonstrate these traits being enhanced rather than to make assumptions, thus avoiding common pitfalls of programs and giving them the legitimacy that they deserve.

In this study the intercultural skills of students that were going to study abroad and students that were going to remain on campus were compared using a written survey pretest and posttest distributed by mail at the Texas Christian University in the fall of 2002. Students intercultural exposure was quantified by adding up the total number of close friends of another culture, romantic relationships with someone of another culture, different languages studied, cultural classes taken, religious services attended other than their own, frequency of attendance at cultural and diversity events, and number of trips outside the United States(Williams 2005). The students were also evaluated on emotional residence(ER), flexibility and openness(FO), perceptual acuity(PAC), personal autonomy(PA), and ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism(CCAI), as well as intercultural communication awareness(ICI).It is also worth noting that students who were studying abroad were hypothesized to already have higher intercultural skills and therefore have less room for growth.

The results of the study revealed that indeed students that studied abroad did show a greater increase in intercultural communication skills than those who stayed on campus when comparing the pretest and posttest. The study also showed that the greater predictor of intercultural skills was not simply those that went abroad, but rather those that were exposed to various cultures both on campus and abroad(Williams 2005).

These findings should be of great interest for someone in the international education field seeking to increase the intercultural communication skills of all students on campus and abroad. The idea of increasing culture can have a tangible effect on students intercultural skills is a powerful tool that should be intertwined into the curricula and campus life of any college seeking to prepare students for a more global workplace and ever-changing society.

## Program Assessment Practices

“The Institute of International Education (IIE) and the Association of International Educators’ (NAFSA) Section on U.S. Students Abroad (SECUSSA) found that most universities ask students to do some type of evaluation after their international study. In a survey of 120 universities, accounting for nearly 50% of U.S. study abroad students, they found the following:

- 95% of the respondents assess student satisfaction
- 40% are measuring gains in language proficiency
- less than a third are assessing academic achievement gains or gains in personal development
- less than 10% are measuring career-related outcomes
- 15% are assessing intercultural proficiency” (Durrant & Doris 2007)

Every study abroad program that hopes to achieve a specific learning outcome or maintain student satisfaction should be participating in some form of program assessment. There are various methods of assessing study abroad programs and it should be noted that each method should have its own particulars and may be more or less advantageous depending on the circumstances. Four main methods of program assessment were identified and explored in the paper *Study Abroad Survey Instruments: A Comparison of Survey Types and Experiences*. They were the Standard Paper Questionnaire, the Bubble Sheet Format, the Open-Form Survey with Scanning Technology, and the Web-Based Survey with Linked Data Sets (Durrant & Doris 2007). There are six basic considerations that must be taken into account when choosing which type of survey is the best one for your program:

1. How big is your sample size?
2. How quickly do you need the results?
3. What will you do with the results (analysis vs. review)?
4. What quality of data are you comfortable with?
5. How much money can you invest in the survey?
6. How much work are you comfortable with to get the surveys out and returned? (Durrant & Doris 2007)

The Standard Questionnaire can be useful for its ease of use and ability to be copied. Its drawbacks are that it requires hand entry in order to perform any type of analysis, usually only administrators and program directors read them, and comments are often times too vague.

Bubble sheet format is easier to enter data than with the questionnaire and can therefore be more easily statistically analyzed and shared. The downside of this format is that many students and directors find it too long and confusing. Due to the fact it is still a paper format it also means that directors or students need to carry them with them and use postage to send them back.

Open-form survey with scanning technology have the benefits of being shorter and do not need to be program specific. Open ended questions can be coded and analyzed as qualitative data. The electronic format gives it the advantage of being easily stored and transferred. Problems arise with the amount of labor involved with the scanning process as well as the need for technical expertise (Durrant & Doris 2007).

Web-based survey with linked data sets are able to reduce respondent completion time, reduce the need for data entry and back-end data processing, and a cost reduction in printing and postage fees. While web-based surveys may seem like a the best option to many there are two major drawbacks. The first is that web-based survey's tend to have lower response rates than paper survey's administered by instructors(Durrant & Doris 2007). Program directors and facilitators can influence this through offering a financial incentive such as a gift card or by making it part of a participation grade. The other major drawback is when students have limited access to a computer or internet in their host country. This extra burden can limit both the response rate and the quality of responses. This can be solved by giving students the option to respond to the survey upon returning to the U.S.. Popular resources for web-based surveys are [surveymonkey.com](http://surveymonkey.com) and [boomerang.com](http://boomerang.com).

## Conclusion

The research that has been done on study abroad has been a useful tool to the study abroad directors and program designers of universities and 3rd party providers, however it seems that with each new study there raises another question unanswered. For those working in the International Education field it will up to them to not only design program which produce specific learning outcomes, but to also prove that their students have learned through carefully designed and implemented program assessment surveys. This paper has outlined ways in which programs can increase global citizenship and intercultural communication as well as various methods one can use to evaluate the success of achieving those outcomes. The Open Doors 2014 “fast facts” report states that U.S. student participation in study abroad has more than tripled over the past two decades and in 2012/13 a total of 289,408 U.S. students studied abroad(Institute of International Education 2014). This type of growth is astounding and as it to continues to grow, the field must continue to educate and serve its students with the best possible learning outcomes and

quality that the field indeed produces and deserves.

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