

Why Universities Should Embrace Study Abroad

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Educational benefits of travel have been widely recognized for hundreds of years. The spread of industrialization around the world has reduced cost, political, and technology barriers that limited travel in the past. World trade is exploding, and the need to understand and deal with people from other nations has never been so important. Study abroad learning is a powerful tool to accomplish the important mission of preparing students for the 21st century. This paper presents the academic literature on learning through travel, and the necessary requirements for successful academic study abroad. Most importantly, the paper demonstrates the impact that study abroad programs provide in strengthening educational value for students, student recruitment and retention, and helping institutions achieve their globally focused academic missions.

JEL Codes: A22, A23 and F14

1. Introduction

Many studies of individual study abroad experiences are in the literature, but we found no comprehensive study of the study abroad concept as an essential part of the college curriculum. There is increased emphasis by university accrediting bodies on globalization of the curriculum to better prepare students for the 21st century. This study seeks to determine if study abroad can be an important part of that globalization process. This study fills a void in the literature by analyzing the results of more than twenty-five studies. Each of these “micro” studies provides an analysis of individual study abroad programs, and in each case significant benefits of the programs were reported. Other researchers did not look at the broad concept of study abroad as a curriculum enhancement. This study provides a “macro” view of the study abroad concept as a means to better prepare students for the new century of increased trade, scientific advances, and cultural exchange.

The literature review provides a detailed analysis of “micro” studies of individual study abroad projects. Many of these studies document specific beneficial results of study abroad programs. The findings section applies the results of the “micro” studies to describe how the broad concept of study abroad can be applied to the “globalized” curriculum. The important role of faculty and administration support is discussed. Finally, the conclusions and limitations section suggests how these findings can be applied to enhance the college curriculum.

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2. Literature Review

The educational benefits of learning through travel have been recognized for hundreds of years. For example, Ritchie (2003) has documented the practice of the “Grand Tour” for upper-class young British men as early as the 17th century. They would tour Europe with a tutor as preparation for adult life. Ancient Chinese philosophers have cited the educational benefits of travel, as recorded by Brodsky-Porges (1981). The wealthy always have traveled for business and pleasure, and today the toy of choice for the super-rich is an ocean-going yacht or a private jet airplane. Falk, a leading researcher in the field of tourism, reports, “the nexus between learning and travel remains a relatively under-researched field” (Falk, 2012). However, in the field of education, there is significant research on the educational benefits of travel.

John Dewey, one of the most influential American philosophers, made significant contributions to the theory of education (Dewey, 1979). The focus of his work was in seeking the unity of theory and practice. In his famous lecture in the Kappa Delta Pi Lecture Series in 1938, he summarized his life work: “The belief that all education comes from experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative.” (Dewey, 1979, page 25.) He described at length his concept of “genuinely educative” experience as experience that is “agreeable and enjoyable to the student” in the short term, but also “promotes desirable future experiences” (Dewey, 1979, p27). The central idea is that such experience provides the student an added ability to apply the experience and achieve more and better results in the future. We will demonstrate here that learning through travel meets this standard by making students better rounded and aware of the modern world. In the context of globalization and preparing students for the twenty-first century, there may be no better means to this end.

In the 2013 academic year, 289,408 US students participated in some form of study abroad for academic credit. (NAFSA) No doubt many more students participated in local field trips and domestic travel. With 21 million students enrolled in US higher education, less than 1.5% of these students are benefitting from study abroad programs. We as educators have a great opportunity to add value for our students and our institutions in this important area. The focus of this paper is the short-term (less than 14 days) study abroad experience because of its expected cross-cultural benefits, its applicability to all academic disciplines, its relatively low cost for students, and the limited data on domestic education travel. It is very important to recognize that a short term (less than 14 days) study abroad experience is a rigorous, semester-long effort, usually offered for three semester hours academic credit. A typical study-abroad program will include significant reading and preparation prior to the travel, an intensive course-related itinerary during the travel, and a significant paper, presentation, or other work product after the travel. Usually a country study or final exam will complete the course.

Thomas Friedman helped us understand that “the world is flat”. Twentieth century advances in communications, transportation, and other technologies have facilitated huge increases in trade and travel. These advances have affected every industry and every nation. In higher education, we see the recent rise of online education as an example. These changes not only affect higher education, but they call for a response in the way we train students for the twenty-first century. (Friedman, 2005). University accreditation bodies are emphasizing “globalization of the curriculum” (AACSB, 2015 and Paul and Mukhopadhyay, 2003).

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In recent years more college degree programs have incorporated learning through travel for academic credit to better prepare students for their careers and for life-long learning. Important research questions are:

1. Can students benefit from a travel learning experience in a college degree curriculum?
2. How can travel learning be planned and executed for maximum benefit and limited cost?
3. Can travel learning support the mission of the university?

Among the benefits claimed for travel learning are: appreciation of other cultures and one's own culture, self-confidence, adaptability, independence, problem-solving skills, inter-personal skills, exposure to alternative market systems, and specific knowledge such as geography and language. There is a rich literature of active learning or cooperative learning. The Johnson brothers engaged in research and teaching in active learning at the University of Minnesota for many years, and they virtually founded their field of study. (See Johnson, 1998, p 26-35). This school of thought advocates learning by doing, and the key is the active participation of the student in the learning process. The prevalence of the team research paper, the laboratory experiment, competitive debates, and problem based learning, and field observation all are examples of active learning techniques. Travel learning also is a form of active learning because the student is actively engaged in exploring new situations and is learning in collaboration with others.

Many researchers have studied travel learning, and there are many forms of such educational travel. The primary accrediting body for US business schools, AACSB, has long encouraged globalization of the curriculum and international travel learning. In proposing standards for study abroad efforts, they state, "...the length of the program must be balanced against intended results. Short-term programs, when well-structured and value added, are quite useful..." (AACSB International, 2002). A very important lesson of this research is that although semester or year-long term study abroad is quite beneficial to many students, a short term study abroad program can serve many more students at much less cost, provide faculty-led learning, and more effectively achieve the international mission of the university.

The most common form of study abroad learning is the faculty-led, group tour of less than 14 days, usually for academic credit. Some students spend a summer, a semester, or a year abroad. Many of these longer-term travelers participate independently from a group, including those who live with a family for an extended time. Some young people take a "gap year" for travel as an interruption in their academic schedule to gain knowledge and experience without specific academic credit. Some universities encourage a "gap year" by allowing those accepted for admission to delay enrollment for one year, usually for travel. Adventurous backpackers may wander abroad aimlessly, and others settle temporarily to participate in local culture and work to provide their own financial support. Davis (2012) reports on young Americans who teach English (illegally) in China and must leave the country every three months to get a new tourist visa. Some healthcare academic programs routinely incorporate practicums or internships outside the classroom for the purpose of gaining personal experience. The "Study Aboard" program at Texas A&M University engages students in seven-day cruises to expose them to the theory and practice of cruise ship management as a component of the travel and tourism curriculum (see Stone and Petrick, 2013).

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Zimpher and Wright (2006) report that co-operative education programs have been popular in some academic fields for many years, starting at the University of Cincinnati in 1906. These programs usually involve undergraduate students alternating between full time paid work and full time study until they complete their degree. Historically about half of these students receive a job offer from their host. Other Co-Op programs are structured for students to work 20 hours per week and attend classes part time until they complete their degree. While the Co-Op program does not necessarily involve travel, it is an effort to rotate the student into the real-world situation related to his or her academic field of study, where the work and the study are thought to be mutually reinforcing.

Some employers offer internships as a service to the community of students and as a recruiting tool for future employees. In the past many internships were unpaid, but some were paid. Recent efforts by the US Department of Labor frown on unpaid internships and apply the wage and hour laws to student workers. The net result of this effort may well be to reduce the offerings of internships, increasing the need for other forms of experiential learning. The field practicum is a common part of the graduate curriculum for Social Work programs, usually required by state certification policy. These activities involve students leaving the classroom and working directly with clients, where students can apply the theory of the classroom. Lee and Fortune (2013a and 2013b) have documented the active learning aspects of these internships and how they relate to desired learning outcomes. For the same reasons, many medical schools have adopted “problem-based learning” as a teaching technique based on learning by doing. Harvard Business School pioneered the case approach to management training many years ago. Both the practicum and the problem-based learning approaches focus on the importance of student reflection to integrate the classroom and field experience. The same reflection is important in a study abroad program.

Service learning is an important educational technique in which students learn by serving others. Some of these efforts involve travel, but all involve the students outside of the classroom and generally with clients in need of the service. Most of these programs are structured as volunteer efforts close to home, such as Habitat for Humanity projects. The Peace Corps is a longstanding example of service learning, deploying young graduates who want to work for personal fulfillment rather than academic credit. Dellaportas and Hassall (2013) reported on the potential for high impact learning outside the classroom. Accounting students visited a prison to spend time with convicts who were former professional accountants. Survey data analysis suggested that the students learned about accounting ethics, factors contributing to fraudulent conduct, and the consequences of personal failures.

The effects of travel learning are difficult to measure, but survey research is amazingly consistent in reporting strong benefits by participants. Paige (2009) surveyed 6,000 study abroad participants long after their study abroad and after graduation. The travel veterans were asked to identify which of their college experiences had the greatest impact on their lives, and “study abroad” was the leading response. Some studies attempt to measure learning and grades of travel learning veterans. Miller-Perrin and Thompson (2010) measured achievement scores, and found scores increased for students who had a study abroad experience, and declined for the control group that did not travel. In a similar study, Sutton and Rubin (2004) compared 250 students with travel learning experience with a control group and found similar benefits for the travelers. Ingraham and Peterson (2004) studied 1,100 students and reported

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improved academic performance by the travelers compared to a control group. More recently, Deck surveyed MBA students who participated in an 11-day study abroad trip in Spain. The control group was a group of students in the same MBA program that did not travel but took an international business course at their home campus. The traveling group strongly endorsed the travel experience and seemed to have achieved a much higher level of understanding of the culture and business setting of Spain. (Deck, 2012).

Most studies do show added benefits for longer-term travelers. Dwyer (2004) conducted a study of 3,700 students in the Institute for International Education of Students (IES) programs over 50 years. He considered travel study benefits such as lasting impact on worldview, increased self-confidence, and understanding of own cultural values. While longer-term travelers reported higher benefits than shorter-term travelers, more than 90% of each group reported these benefits. The American Institute for Foreign Study (AIFS, 1988) produced a longitudinal study comparing the results for summer-abroad and year-abroad students. In terms of the goal of "increased knowledge of a specific culture", 92% of the longer-term travelers achieved the goal, while 79% of the shorter-term travelers did so. The longer-term travel experience may not be available to many students due to cost and time, and it appears that short-term travelers do gain a significant and substantial benefit from a travel learning experience. Virtually no evidence to the contrary has been found. This argument is essentially the case for accessibility. It is impossible to challenge study abroad programs on their merits. Faculty-led, short term study abroad programs are the fastest growing segment of the student travel arena. We should recognize that enabling greater student participation means that institutions will be able to impact more of their students and better achieve their missions.

3. Faculty Leadership and Administrative Support

Developing a successful study abroad initiative takes a significant effort across campus. With planning, input, and buy-in required at all levels, it is important for the institution to develop a policy for approvals, budgets, and deadlines that are consistent with the institutional mission. Faculty members who are actively involved in study abroad will develop valuable professional contacts and will likely generate research and case study opportunities. Faculty program directors should always consider including on a program other faculty members who are interested in these opportunities, and who may become program directors in the future. If a group of twenty or more students can be enrolled on a study abroad program, generally the costs of two traveling faculty members will be covered.

There also will be costs to the university of offering a study abroad experience. Administrative overhead and faculty planning can be significant, especially for a small or startup program. These fixed costs become smaller on average if the program grows. Faculty salary to teach the study abroad course is a direct cost, although many schools treat this course as an overload paid at the pay rate for adjunct faculty. At LeTourneau University, the university strongly supports the development of the study abroad program by waiving tuition. The students pay a charge that covers their travel and accommodations, plus their share of overhead for planning and conducting the trip. The net result is that they pay about the same price they would pay for tuition, so there is little additional cost for study abroad students.

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The university is willing to waive the tuition because the benefits of study abroad are recognized. The study abroad program helps the university achieve its mission. This policy makes study travel available to many students who have never had that opportunity. Many higher education institutions are leading by offering global perspectives to prospective students. A recent study by Cressy and Stubbs (2010) found that 80% of college-going students and their parents consider having a global dimension to be important in their college search. As well planned study abroad experiences positively impact those who participate, many higher education institutions are working to better prepare their graduates for the global 21st century. While there are different ways to teach global issues, we challenge higher education institutions to support and promote faculty-led, short term study abroad programs.

4. Findings

Any effective study abroad experience must conform to the mission of the university. Usually academic credit is awarded for successful completion. The study abroad experience is structured as a semester long academic course with learning objectives and meaningful individual and team assignments to be completed before, during, and after the travel. The time and level of effort required of students should be appropriate for the number of credit hours awarded. Such courses are offered at the advanced undergraduate and the graduate levels. Because overseas time is limited in shorter term programs, each day is driven by an itinerary rather than the unstructured exploration more common in longer term programs. It is therefore imperative to be intentional about program development and find a partner or third party provider who understands the purpose and goals of higher education study abroad programs.

The first step of planning a successful study abroad program is to have a clear focus on the desired learning outcomes. The learning experience should be appropriate to the subject areas and academic levels of the students. Faculty must prepare assignments and activities to engage students and take advantage of the unique opportunity to visit sites, meet local people, and learn first-hand about an unfamiliar environment. Site selection is the second step of the planning process. The site must support the desired learning outcomes, and it must meet any constraints of time and cost.

Some universities plan and execute study abroad solely with university faculty or staff. Womble (2014) describes the process at West Texas A&M University College of Business. Their process begins with a faculty visit to the intended destination to develop an itinerary and make contacts for local visits. Often faculty interest or existing contacts with professionals abroad suggest the tour destinations. They have recently completed successful study abroad experiences to Russia, Denmark, London, and Canada. This model requires dedicated staff support to manage reservations and local details at the destination. It can work best when the traveling faculty or staff are very familiar with the destination, including the language, transit system, and culture.

An alternative model is to use a travel agency to make arrangements for travel and hotels. Faculty would still need to manage the site visits to achieve the intended learning objectives. It is not unusual for a study abroad schedule to require modification with little notice due to traffic, weather, interruption of transit, or a situation at the intended visit site. For this reason,

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the tour director must be prepared to make alternative arrangements, such as changing activities to a different time or day. In some cases, alternative schedules can be planned, but unexpected events are always a possibility. While some “free time” is often a part of the schedule, it is important to use most of the available time on a tour to achieve the learning objectives.

Our travel agency partner, Education First College Study Tours, based in Boston, has developed a large group of local tour guides in 65 nations who know the local area, speak the local languages, and live in the area. The tour guide meets the groups at the arrival airport and stays with the group throughout the trip. They coordinate the local travel by bus, taxi, subway, or walking tour. Most important, they are able to adjust the schedule when necessary. In most cases these tour guides have managed the study abroad itineraries for many college groups, and they can answer questions students ask about local culture, customs, locations, and foods. Faculty tour leaders can perform these duties to some extent, but the local tour guide has extensive knowledge and insight that will contribute to the learning experience. An organization such as Education First has a large portfolio of study abroad itineraries that have been successful for other universities. That portfolio of itineraries along with faculty interests and professional contacts can facilitate site selection for a new study abroad program.

After the learning objectives and site are considered, a detailed daily itinerary is developed to gain the maximum value from cultural or historical sites in the area. Local meetings and visits can be scheduled, considering educational value, cost, and travel time. In addition, it is important to allow time for reflection, group discussion, and free time for exploring and absorbing the local culture.

Air travel usually is required, and a travel agent can secure group travel rates. In some cases, alternative airports or flight connections can be used to lower the cost and still meet the time constraints of the schedule. In most cases economy (lowest price) air travel will be included in the price of the tour, and individuals usually can pay to upgrade to a higher class of service if they wish. All travelers need to be aware of the security requirements implemented by the Transportation Security Administration, as well as guidelines provided by each airline for checked baggage, carryon baggage, and check in procedures. In most cases each traveler will need a passport and possibly a visa. Travelers should purchase an individual travel insurance policy to cover emergency medical care and evacuation.

Lodging is a very important aspect of the study abroad tour. A qualified travel agent should be able to arrange accommodations that are convenient, safe, comfortable, and economical. Many tours are planned to place younger students four to a room and older students two to a room. Younger, single students are used to this “dormitory” style housing, and it does contribute to the exchange of ideas and development of camaraderie during a tour. Double occupancy rooming may be preferred at a slightly higher cost. It is most common to have hotel rooms with separate beds, private bath and shower, internet connection, and a small breakfast each morning.

Usually the hotel and air expenses for the faculty tour leader are built into the total price charged to each student. In some cases, the tour schedule can be managed to use less expensive hotels or hostels near tour destinations, rather than more expensive central city properties.

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Travel planners and tour guides who are familiar with the local area are well positioned to balance hotel cost, travel time, convenience, quality of accommodations, and amenities of the property.

Some meals are usually built into the tour schedule, and some are left unscheduled for students to purchase during their free time. Often the meal schedule depends on the nature of the local area, time constraints, and the availability of restaurants and other facilities. Students should be given an estimate of the cost of meals, admissions, or other activities that are not included in the tour, including tips for the tour guide and bus driver.

Some free time should be provided to allow students to experience the local culture and people. However, the learning objectives should guide the planning to achieve the educational purpose of the tour. In some cases, the group may meet for discussion or lecture, especially soon after a site visit. Often students have team assignments, and time for such work also can be very productive immediately after a site visit. It is important to have a good balance of site visits, academic reflection, cultural immersion, and free time to achieve the goals of a study abroad tour in a professional manner. For example, when a group encounters a local post office, it is advisable to allow students time to buy, write, and mail postcards home. The destination may also suggest the use of free time. In a large city, free time may be especially valuable if students can spend a few hours at the British Museum in London or the Louvre in Paris. In a rural setting more scheduled activities are needed. Often an experienced tour guide can help the faculty planners identify suitable sites and activities that are consistent with the learning objectives.

The cost of a study abroad tour may be a problem for many students. Cost can be controlled to some extent through the selection of the destination and accommodations. A larger group of students spreads the fixed cost, so the average cost is lower. In addition, an experienced travel agent can often find ways to limit costs due to their travel industry status and their knowledge of group rates. Because most study abroad programs are structured as a college course, student financial aid may be used. Some MBA programs build the cost of a study abroad experience into the tuition for every course, so the students do not see a lump sum payment for the travel. This policy strongly encourages all students to participate in the trip.

An effective way to broaden a study abroad program and make it more cost effective is to offer several academic courses in a single travel event. For example, groups of students learning about international business, English literature, modern European history, or international political science may share some itineraries in a trip to London. Many universities encourage students to conduct fund raising activities throughout the year to cover some costs of study abroad. In some cases, the funds raised are used to provide student scholarships for the trip. Student academic clubs that raise funds as a group effort may also generate more interest and participation in the trip. In many cases family members and the local community will want to contribute to the financing of a worthy cause.

5. Conclusions and Limitations

This research adds value by providing a unique and comprehensive meta-study of more than twenty-five studies of individual study abroad efforts. It shows that study abroad travel can be a valuable part of the college curriculum by fostering cross-cultural understanding more effectively than classroom instruction. This research is important because increasing globalization and trade has made the world “flatter” and more interconnected. Many universities are seeking to better prepare their students for the more globalized twenty-first century, and study abroad learning can play a central role in that effort. This study is limited to short term travel learning (up to fourteen days) for academic credit. Additional research on semester-long programs, exchange programs, and other extended study abroad programs may yield useful results.

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