

Study Abroad

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A study abroad is when a university student lives in another culture for a predetermined amount of time for the purpose of studying academically. When study abroad programs were first introduced, they were primarily for language acquisition, and for students studying the arts to gain first-hand experience with artifacts (Twombly, 2012). Over the years the term “study abroad” has developed to apply to experiential learning that is centered on furthering studies towards an academic degree (Twombly, 2012). In research surrounding study abroad programs, University of Kansas professor, Susan Twombly (2012) pointed out that study abroad programs include students who are currently enrolled in the US college system, but temporarily enroll in foreign school systems for their own benefit, missionary and other service, research, and internships. In this chapter, we discuss study abroad programs and their benefits. We will focus primarily on university students who are pursuing an academic, university-level degree.

Student-Centered Travel

Studying abroad tends to be a very “student-centered” experience. Learning shifts from teacher-centered to student-centered often depending on the influence of five principles: the balance of power, the function of course content, the role of the teacher vs. the role of the student, the responsibility for learning, and the purpose and process for evaluation (Wright, 2011). Studying abroad provides a unique student-centered experience because of the agency it provides. “Students are the center of the educational enterprise, and their cognitive and affective learning experiences should guide all decisions as to what is done and how” (Wright, 2011, p.93).

Brief history

In 1923, the University of Delaware sent a cohort of students to France as part of the first official study abroad program facilitated by a university in the United States (University of Delaware, n.d.). At the time, this was an enormously daunting and extremely costly endeavor. The project was driven by the potential language acquisition and cultural awareness benefits for students in the wake of WWI. Following this pioneering achievement, the number of study abroad programs conducted by universities across the country has only increased in both quantity and diversity (U.S. Department of State, 2019).

In each year since the 1960’s, roughly two-thirds of all American study-abroad students have consistently been women. The majority of those who have studied abroad reported spending between three and six months away, with more than a quarter of these studies abroad falling in the four-month range (Paige et al., 2009). The tendency to spend roughly four months abroad suggests that many students participate in a study abroad for the length of a typical college semester. Similar to the original study abroad cohort visiting Europe, the top ten destinations for study abroad programs since 1960 have been the UK, France, Spain, Italy, Germany, China, Australia, Japan, Mexico and Greece (Paige et al., 2009).

Perhaps one explanation for the increasing popularity of studying abroad is the finding that alumni who studied abroad at some point during their college careers reported it as the experience creating the strongest impact during their college experience (Paige et al., 2009). Interestingly, more than half of the same respondents reported going on to pursue advanced degrees following the study abroad experience, and of those, 35% of the degrees were internationally oriented (Paige et al., 2009). Clearly, studying abroad has greatly influenced many college students for decades, and will likely continue to do so with increasing frequency as there has been a steady increase in the number of students studying abroad for the last 25 years (Open Doors, 2020).

Outcomes

To better understand students' motivations for studying abroad and the resulting outcomes, Luo and Jamieson-Drake (2015) analyzed data collected from 19 different colleges and universities. The researchers found that female students often participated in study abroad due to influence from prominent figures in education. Male students, in contrast, more frequently tended to study abroad because of a desire to explore personal values or follow the influence of peers (Luo & Jamieson-Drake 2015). At the conclusion of this study, researchers determined that some of the most influential motivations for students of both genders to study abroad were greater understanding of culture and positive social interactions with peers (Luo & Jamieson-Drake 2015).

Language Acquisition

Research has continually proven that study abroad programs provide a productive environment and "statistically significant gains" for language learning (Kinging, 2008, p. 107). Factors that affect language acquisition while studying abroad include the student's living arrangement, social experience, and disposition toward language learning. Students who live in a homestay environment with native speakers—rather than shared student housing—have a significantly greater language capability by the end of their stay (Kinging, 2008). A similar increase in language capabilities tends to be seen in those who are encouraged to develop social circles outside of their living arrangement. Most importantly, a student must have a positive disposition towards acquiring a language. A student who shows strong desire and motivation to learn the native language will have significantly more success (Kinging, 2008).

Dan E. Davidson (2007) noted that linguistic learning on a study abroad is a more effective way of learning a language. As more formal time is spent learning a language, learners often lose the appeal and motivation to study and practice (Davidson, 2007). Real-world contexts such as a study abroad lend themselves to more practice and improved attitudes toward language acquisition. These improved attitudes later benefit classroom study and student morale regarding language acquisition. Students who study abroad were also more likely to obtain graduate education "than the general US college undergraduate population" (Paige et al., 2009, p. S41).

Affective Outcomes

Studying abroad seems to have lifelong impacts on individuals. Studies have confirmed that those who have returned from studying abroad reported an increase in self-confidence and maturity, greater tolerance for ambiguity, change or refinement in political beliefs and a general change in world view (Dwyer, 2004). Research also indicated that these impacts can be sustained for as long as 50 years. Individuals associated an increase in their sense of personal responsibility and a significant

development in their intercultural awareness (Ingraham & Peterson, 2004). Students also are significantly more likely to seek opportunities for global engagement throughout their lives in career paths and general development. This engagement seems to cause students to evaluate and debunk stereotypes “while at the same time obtaining a deeper understanding of social contexts and behaviors” (Freestone & Geldens, 2008, pg. 52).

Theoretical foundations

While it is valuable to recognize that studying abroad has strong impacts on participating students, it is also relevant for organizers of such programs to understand *why* this is the case. Two theoretical frameworks are frequently cited in the literature to explain the effects studying abroad has on students: Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) and Transformative Learning Theory (TLT).

Experiential Learning

As originally articulated by Dewey (1938), experience is both the means and the goal of education. ETL proposes that as people are exposed to various stimuli, they have unique, personal experiences that teach them. This view is unique in that it describes how each individual person receives a personalized education through the particular combinations of experiences they undergo throughout life. Because studying abroad often exposes students to situations (or stimuli) which are new and interesting, students have a greater variety of experiences through which they gain knowledge and experience otherwise unavailable to them (Stone & Petrick, 2013). They would not have learned such impactful lessons had they simply stayed at home where they would not have been exposed to such a diversity of new stimuli. Students in a new environment must reflect on their experiences and draw new conclusions.

Transformative Learning

Similar to the basic tenets of ELT, TLT describes the process where learners must make sense of new stimuli to which they are exposed. More specifically, however, TLT explains how learners must reevaluate previously held beliefs and assumptions in light of new experiences which tends to transform their existing worldviews (Mezirow, 1991). The connection is clear between TLT and the types of learning that occurs on a study abroad—students are exposed to new cultures, customs, people, and perspectives which force them to assess their beliefs, and often alter them to accommodate new realizations. Morgan (2010) described how a student leaves as a normal resident, and returns from travels a “transformed home comer” (p. 252). The deeper the experience, the more opportunity it has to transform previously held beliefs. Often, this can mean that those who are willing to go off the path beaten by the official study abroad program have a greater chance of finding unique experiences that can powerfully change them.

Best Practices

Because study abroads have so many elements and facets, the design of the experience has large implications for the expected outcomes. When planning to facilitate a study abroad experience for others, or when considering programs one might take part in as a student, the following factors should be considered:

Length

Although the majority of study abroad experiences last between three and six months, which is equivalent in length to a typical college semester (Paige et al., 2009), longer programs tend to have greater outcomes. According to Dwyer (2004), an average study abroad program tends to have a more enduring impact when they last for at least one full year. Research by Kevin Kehl (2006) of Baylor University showed that students who studied abroad for at least a semester were assessed as being more globally minded when compared to students who studied abroad for eight weeks or less. The longer an individual studies abroad, the more growth they are likely to see in language acquisition, academic success, intercultural development, and personal growth. In a survey by Freestone and Geldens (2008), students reported that staying for longer periods enabled them to spend more time in environments that highlight the uniqueness of their host destination—experiences that mass-tourism could never equal. However, summer programs that last only six weeks have achieved sustainable benefits for students when careful educational planning, expert implementation, and significant resources are used (Sachau, 2010). These shorter programs cannot, however, replace the potent results of a one to two semester program (assuming college semester lasting roughly 15 weeks).

Homestay Environments

Students who stay with local families have significant success in their academic and affective outcomes (Kinginger, 2008). Linguistic acquisition is greatly improved when individuals live with native speakers who help and encourage authentic speaking experiences. It also helps students to develop a social circle outside of fellow program participants. This promotes opportunities for global engagement which helps to debunk stereotypes and expand worldviews. When possible, students should seek study abroad opportunities that allow for the homestay experience.

“The quest for authenticity” is a term coined in Cohen’s (1988, p. 373) *Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences* which explains that students seek study abroad and exchange programs because they provide a unique, authentic experience that general traveling and tourism never could. The length of a program and the homestay environment are two major factors that promote authentic experiences. Students and schools should strive to create culturally rich and authentic experiences.

Inequities

Regardless of the tremendous value in spending time abroad, there has not historically been equal participation in study abroad programs. One such inequity is the finding that over the past decade, only 34.7% of students studying abroad are men. Research has shown that this is due, in part, to men being significantly less culturally sensitive than women (Tompkins et al., 2017). Women were also shown to be more motivated to understand and appreciate differences among cultures. One potential remedy for this imbalance could be intercultural opportunities on campus which may improve men’s interest in studying abroad. Age can also play a limiting role, although research shows that while older students quickly adapt and see academic and affective benefits while studying abroad, younger students tend to be more successful in the long term (Llanes & Munoz, 2013). Nationality is a third characteristic which may play a role in motivating or demotivating students to study abroad. China sends the most students abroad by a large margin, followed by India, Korea, Germany, Saudi Arabia, France, and the United States (Sheth, 2017). This is at least partially due to the differences in educational options available in their home countries (Sanchez & Fornerino, 2006).

Conclusion

To conclude, it is important to emphasize the tremendous value study abroads can hold for university students. Out of roughly 6,000 alumni who participated in at least one study abroad during college, the study abroad was ranked, on average, as the most important experience out of all provided options (Paige et al., 2009). Study abroad programs have a significant, life-long impact on the lives of participating students (Dwyer, 2004).

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