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**Improving Student and Instructor Success in Study Abroad Programs:
A Brief Report of Student Suggestions**

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Abstract

This study examines student suggestions for short-term study abroad programs design. Undergraduate and graduate students (N=5) who participated in a short-term study abroad program completed an open-ended questionnaire focusing on suggestions for future students and faculty members participating in study abroad programs. Results indicate that study abroad programs should be limited to a small number of students and organized to enable student travel; instructors should be available, yet not parental-like, serve as sources of information, and devote considerable time to language skills. Implications and limitations are considered.¹

Keywords: study abroad, program improvements, Sweden, student success, faculty success, foreign exchange, international students

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. Introduction

World-wide, universities and colleges actively work to provide a well-rounded and comprehensive education for their students. One such effort is foreign exchange and study abroad programs. Higher education institutions are not only providing opportunities for their own students to study abroad, but also strive to host foreign students. In addition to educational institutions' efforts to promote study abroad programs, the State Department has enabled foreign students to work while in the U.S., making the U.S. a more attractive and feasible alternative host country for foreign students. Further, a legislation (Senator Paul Simon's Study Abroad Foundation Act) has been approved by the House, which will enable one million American college students annually to attend colleges and universities abroad (McMurtrie & Bollag, 2007). Additionally, some American colleges have branched out internationally, offering both undergraduate and graduate degrees abroad (Bollag, 2006). With both educational institutions and governmental agencies and departments actively working to expand American study abroad programs, the need for and benefits of providing study abroad experiences become clear. The purpose of this study was first to review the need for, and benefits of study abroad programs. Second, to provide suggestions for future students participating in study abroad programs, and suggestions for faculty members developing and directing study abroad programs.

Bollag (2005) reviewed statistics about students who leave their native country to pursue higher education abroad. The data suggested that approximately two million students attend colleges and universities abroad (i.e., outside their country of origin). These numbers have historically increased annually according to Gardner and Withrell (2006). However, the number of foreign students pursuing their education in the United States declined by 2.4 percent during the 2003/2004 academic year as a result of the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. This decrease in foreign student enrollment at American institutions, however, was not necessarily due to a fear of attending schools on American soil, but rather a direct result of the increased and more demanding requirements to obtain a student VISA for the United States. According to Gardner and Withrell (2006), this was the first decrease in foreign student enrollment in the United States in more than thirty years. Although the number of international students attending American institutions continued to decline after the September 11 terrorist attacks, the decline has slowed down, and the numbers seem to have stabilized according to IIE Network. During the 2006/2007 academic year, the U.S. hosted 564,766 international students, which resulted in 52% of American institutions reporting an increased enrollment of international students, while 20% reporting a decreased, and 28% reporting no significant changes. Furthermore, the number of foreign students attending American institutions from the ten leading nations in terms of sending students to American institutions has continued to increase. Only India, which remains the leading nation in terms of sending students to the U.S. with more than 76,500 students in the U.S., has decreased by 5%.

Bollag (2005) predicted a continued increase in foreign student enrollment worldwide with a total of roughly four million in 2015, and upwards of eight million students worldwide by the year 2025. However, Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005) noted that despite this predicted increase, American students continue to be reluctant to study abroad. In fact, less than one percent of American college student participate in study abroad programs. Furthermore, roughly thirty percent of American students participating in study abroad attend institutions in English speaking countries. There are several reasons American students chose not to study abroad. For instance, insufficient funding, the fear of violent attacks (especially after the fairly recent

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terrorist attacks), and a fear of not “fitting in” or an inability to adjust to the host culture (Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005).

Fortunately, several of these reasons influencing American college students to not study abroad are simply myths. However, the benefits of studying abroad are well-documented. With this information in mind, we can focus on some of the benefits of studying abroad, both in terms of students and faculty members. It is particularly important to acknowledge these benefits as we live in a world of rapid globalization, which results in an increase of expatriates worldwide (Festervard & Tiller, 2001).

The Need for and Benefits of Study Abroad Programs

Due to the fact that we are experiencing rapid globalization, Festervard and Tiller (2001) concluded that the number of Americans working in foreign countries will continue to increase. Further, an increasing number of professional organizations acknowledge the importance of “greater exposure to international environment[s]” (Festervard & Tiller, 2001, p. 102). Lane (2003) further emphasized this need when arguing that Americans’ knowledge of the world outside the United States is limited and must be improved in order for American businesses to remain competitive in the global market. Festervard and Tiller (2001) therefore claimed that universities have to accept their responsibilities in terms of preparing future professionals for careers in multinational organizations.

However, much of that responsibility is left to the individual faculty members. Lane (2003) argued that one of the major contributing factors for the limited number of American college students studying abroad is in fact due to a lack of faculty participation and involvement, rather than a lack of funding and fear of physical harm as suggested by Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005). Therefore, faculty members around the country have to start developing additional study abroad programs to increase the number of American students studying abroad. Currently, roughly 220,000 Americans attend colleges and universities abroad, which equals roughly one percent of the American college student population, who attend approximately 3,400 accredited institutions nationwide (Gardner & Withrell, 2007).

This need for additional programs is, to a large degree, due to the numerous benefits of study abroad programs, but the benefits are also of different caliber. Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005) argued that by studying abroad, students will naturally become more aware of the host country’s culture and improve their language skills among other personal, career, and academic advancements. However, Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005) also argued that study abroad programs can have more profound effects, such as “transforming their [the students’] worldviews” (p. 102). Bollag and Field (2006) noted the importance of and need for language skills are immense. Thus, initiatives supporting Fullbright scholarships have been taken to enable additional Americans to study abroad in an effort to develop their language skills. It is not only the students, however, who benefit from study abroad programs. Faculty members also have an opportunity to develop new skills both in terms of their teaching strategies and subject knowledge as it often relates to the host country’s culture. It seems logic, though, that many faculty members avoid such an opportunity due to a lack of knowledge of how to manage a study abroad program. The author developed and marked a new study abroad program during the 2006/2007 academic year.

Brief Program Description

The study abroad program in Sweden took place July 6 through August 6, 2007. Five students traveled to Kristianstad, Sweden where an instructor from the students' local university in the U.S. taught an entrepreneurial (i.e., summer-only) course designed by the program director, who was also the instructor. The course titled "Swedish Language and Culture" emphasized three main components: (1) communication differences between Sweden and the U.S., (2) a language component, and (3) cultural differences, such as holidays, traditions, and rituals.

Although the program duration was one month, the course was organized to enable students to travel. For instance, the first week consisted of intense studies, including three hours per day of in-class lecture/discussion followed by visits to local museums, churches, and other culturally and historically significant sites. Following the first week, the students had one week to travel individually or as a group. The remaining two weeks also allowed students two additional, but shorter, periods of three or four days each to travel. Included in the program cost were also several group dinners, lunches, and day-trips. The students stayed in a dormitory operated by a local university, where most of the class-periods were held.

Rationale

The need for and benefits for additional study abroad programs are overwhelming and plentiful. Both Governmental and institutional initiatives enable American students to study abroad. However, questions of how to execute a study abroad program, what students like and dislike remain unanswered. Surely many institutions survey their returning students to improve future study abroad programs. However, in order to collaboratively increase the number of available study abroad programs and the quality of those programs, institutions and scholars ought to share their results. Thus, to enable faculty members developing new study abroad programs or participating in existing programs to meet their students' needs and to be successful in their endeavors, additional attention should be paid to appropriate strategies faculty members should employ to be success. Further, to encourage students to participate in study abroad programs and to ensure their success and satisfaction, scholars should consider input from returning students of study abroad programs. These findings may also be beneficial when marketing study abroad programs as student needs and desires may be incorporated in the marketing strategies. Thus, the following research questions were raised:

- RQ1 What motivates students to participate in study abroad programs?
- RQ2 How do students benefit from study abroad program?
- RQ3 What suggestions do returning students have for future students participating in study abroad programs?
- RQ4 What suggestion do returning students have for instructors of future study abroad programs?
- RQ5 What do students like the most about study abroad programs?
- RQ6 What do students like the least about study abroad programs?
- RQ7 In addition to these questions, do returning students have other comments, suggestions and/or thoughts about short-term study abroad programs?

Method

The following is a report of the outcomes from the study abroad program in Kristianstad, Sweden during the summer of 2007 as described above. Conducting brief studies post completion of a program is recommended not only to provide the program director and instructor with valuable feedback, but also for marketing purposes, program improvements, and academic studies.

Participants

Undergraduate and graduate students ($N=5$) who participated in the study abroad program in Kristianstad, Sweden participated in the study (males $n=3$ and females $n=2$). The participants' age ranged from 20 to 52, (range=33, $M=30.6$, $SD=14.19$). Student majors were: history ($n=2$), sociology ($n=1$), story telling ($n=1$), and health science ($n=1$). Four students were Caucasian Christians, and one Atheist. No additional demographic data were collected. Participation was voluntary, and options to submit responses via snail-mail were provided to remain anonymous.

Instrument and procedure

Roughly two months after the program completion, a questionnaire was sent as an attached Microsoft Word document to the participants via email. The questionnaire enabled the participants to type their answers in assigned fields and return completed questionnaires via email. The questionnaire included seven open-ended questions in which the students were asked to list three to five responses for each question. The questions were: (1) Why did you decide to participate in a study abroad program? (2) How did you benefit from this program? (i.e., academically, professionally, and personally) (3) What suggestions would you give students of future study abroad programs? (4) What suggestions would you give instructors of future study abroad programs? (5) What did you like the most about this program? (6) What did you like the least about this program? (i.e., what would you have changed?), and (7) Do you have any other comments, suggestions, thoughts?

In addition to the survey, a content analysis of student reflection papers and diaries was conducted to increase the reliability of the questionnaire results. As a part of the course, students were asked to write two reflection papers and to keep a daily journal focusing on cultural differences as related to the course content, as well as likes and dislikes of the program. The students were assured that their comments and suggestions would in no way affect their grades.

Results

Question one was concerned with why the students decided to participate in a study abroad program. Experiencing a different culture, exploring the history and architecture, course offered through the university at which the students were enrolled, and the security of traveling in a small group were the most frequently occurring answers. Question two inquired about how the students benefited from the program. Personal growth, such as increased self-confidence and self-awareness, appreciation for different cultures, being less ethnocentric, and improved language skills were benefits shared by all participants. Question three focused on suggestions for students participating in study abroad programs. Student responses indicated that embracing the local culture by trying foods and activities as well as communicating with natives,

conducting research about the travel destination prior to departure, purchase a public transportation pass if available and utilize free time to travel and explore other aspects of the host culture or other countries if possible. Finally, being flexible in terms of travel plans and always bring a camera was strongly recommended. Question four was concerned with suggestions for instructors of future study abroad programs. Encourage students to travel and explore the area, answer questions, give students room to figure things out on their own, be available but don't be too parental-like, plan group activities, such as lunches, dinners, domestic travels, and site-seeing trips. Allow students personal freedom; provide information materials (i.e., maps, brochures, and travel guides) about the local area. Make class-time fun and interactive, and allow students a week after returning to finish final projects.

Question five focused on what students liked the most about the program. Having personal freedom and time to travel based on the structure of the program were the most appreciated factors. Also, travel destination, location and quality of housing, group dinners and activities; having a small number of students traveling enabled the students to develop close interpersonal relationships with all travelers. Question six focused on what the students liked the least about the program. Unlike the previous questions, only two areas of improvement were suggested. The duration of the program (all students indicated that they would have preferred an entire semester or an academic year); further, students indicated a desire to learn more of the local language. Finally, question seven asked for additional comments and suggestions. The only new information that emerged in this section was suggestions such as bring a credit card, pack lightly as you will purchase clothes and souvenirs. However, one student suggested expanding the program by marketing the program at other local institutions as well.

Discussion

Although the number of students participating in the study is minimal, the comments offered were consistent and provide rich and valuable information to students, instructors, as well as directors of study abroad programs. It should be known that the instructor organized the course collaboratively with the students prior to departure. Three required pre-departure meetings were held during which students were asked to provide feedback for the course structure and content.

Although not identified in this study, Mansson (2007) suggested that instructors taking students abroad should familiarize themselves with local police departments, hospitals, and domestic laws to ensure student safety. Further, during the program, some students expressed concern with their inability to communicate frequently with their family at home. Having at least one laptop computer with Skype or other inexpensive global communication software installed is recommended. Students, parents, and the instructor will benefit from this as students and parents feel at ease, and the instructor will not be responsible for continuous contact with parents in the home country.

In sum, the survey results indicated that ideal study abroad program should, in general, involved a small group of students traveling, programs should be structured to enable students to travel, involve day-trips, lunches, and other group activities, and a significant language component. Finally, instructors should be available, supportive, provide information, but simultaneously avoid being controlling and allowing students to learn through experiences.

In an effort to make study abroad programs feasible for a larger number of students, additional research considering how to decrease program cost is warranted. Further, grant writing opportunities for faculty members considering directing short-term study abroad programs

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should be considered as institutional are encouraging but not necessarily financially supportive of faculty members developing these programs. Finally, to encourage faculty members to get involved in study abroad programs, future research should focus on faculty members' personal and professional growth as associated with study abroad programs.

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