

our view

“How
Are We
Doing?”

*first in a series;
generating thoughts and
discussion in the
study abroad community*

cīee

This is the first in a series of **“food for thought”** pieces from CIEE. The themes vary but all deal with **study abroad for U.S. undergraduates**. We present our ideas not as the only viable ones but rather **to stimulate discourse** in furtherance of the study abroad enterprise. We **welcome your comments** at any time to **editor@ciee.org**.

Most study abroad professionals would argue that study abroad serves a variety of purposes as part of an undergraduate college education: language skill improvement, improved cultural awareness, and increased knowledge in a variety of subjects. It's a way, in some cases, to get students to contemplate their place in society and how that position might relate to the rest of the world. For more than seventy years, and particularly since World War II, study abroad has gained momentum as a way to help students broaden their education in pursuit of these objectives.

Since plans and tactics follow from objectives, how we define what we're trying to accomplish, and how we keep score on how we're doing, is very important. Given the growth and development of study abroad, now might be a good time to think about and perhaps re-think, or at least make explicit, what ends study abroad serves. At the same time we can take stock of our achievements and think about the future.

We increasingly live in an interdependent world. While that message doesn't always reverberate in American society, the reality is that our economic, social, and cultural well-being is more and more determined by influences that come from beyond our borders. Therefore, for every and any reason, a student who has knowledge, understanding, and/or experience beyond our borders brings increased value to our society in both a general way and perhaps in specific economic, cultural, and social ways depending upon life and career choices.

The knowledge, understanding, and experience gained while studying abroad falls into multiple categories. Foreign language acquisition is a driving force for much study abroad. While English is clearly the *lingua franca* for the world, the ability to communicate in a foreign language has positive career and social implications. While a foreign language can be learned within our borders, our research conclusively shows that the ability to communicate in a language increases faster when the language is practiced in the indigenous environ-

ment rather than simply in the classroom. Study abroad isn't the only way to do the job but it's a very effective way.

Many Americans appear to believe that the world is fundamentally "just like us" when in fact it is not. Differing values, assumptions about life and what is important, cultural heritage, religious beliefs, family structures, and more lead to very different views of the world around us. A simple example is instructive. In Spain and Italy, very Catholic countries, the Head of State never ends a speech "God Bless Spain" or "God Bless Italy" the way our President and many national figures end speeches "God Bless America." Yet, these are countries with far less separation of church and state than in the United States. Most students don't have a clue why this is the case even though they should. Do students have to go abroad to learn this? Of course they do not. But surely understanding cultural differences is more likely to be internalized while living in a foreign land than on ones home campus. Context isn't everything but it is important.

From art to architecture, from food to festivals, each part of the world is rich in its own history, tradition, and events. Exposure to these facets of other societies can't help but make students more appreciative of the value of others cultures and therefore more tolerant of differences, more worldly in their views, and more cultured in their appreciation of those differences. While not everyone would agree that this is a big deal, we would argue that it is far more valuable than many appreciate. Experiential learning by definition is neither by nor from the book but is every bit as valuable as more formal instruction.

Language acquisition, comparative cultural knowledge, and cultural, historical, and factual appreciation and understanding are in our view the core forces underlying and therefore driving study abroad. It's these ends that we serve to meet. So, as former New York Mayor Ed Koch would say, "How are we doing?" Our answer, in spite of the recent shrill and simplistic attacks in the popular press about the fri-

volatility of study abroad, is that we’re doing OK but we can do better. We can do better quantitatively and we can do better qualitatively.

First, let’s take a closer look at the numbers. In our view, it’s extremely important, when thinking about programming, to sort out the semester and year-long programs from short-term, largely professor-led, study abroad. If we only look at the total participation figures, study abroad has more than doubled in the last decade extending now to more

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than 160,000 participants each year. On the other hand, more and more of these students are opting for shorter programs—almost half of the total went abroad for a summer term or less—which means that many students are having a much less meaningful experience and deriving a smaller measure of the benefits we are striving to provide. Short-term programming is just that—a chance for some international exposure over a very short period of time. Seeing a foreign culture “as a man sees flowers from a galloping horse” while useful and often educational, is not study abroad; rather it’s study in an abroad context that offers some special educational benefits but the “abroad” part is often a very small part of the learning equation.

As the Chinese saying instructs us, if you want to see the flower, dismount, get close to the flower, have a conversation with the flower, and learn from the flower. In study abroad this means a program lasting at least a semester—we all know that a year is better—and specific strategies in place to ensure that these conversations and this learning actually occur.

Within semester and year-long programs, which represent at least one-eighth of a student's total college curriculum, and provide a full and complete opportunity to meet our collective overseas education goals, we think there are a number of issues that need to be addressed. By doing so we can make sure we maximize the value of the experience given its richness of opportunity. We need to address the recent criticisms mentioned earlier, examine the multiple goals of study abroad, and look at a few program design issues.

Considering first the popular press criticisms, let's be clear, study abroad suffers from some of the same social issues that U.S. colleges and universities address daily. Whether the issue is binge drinking, non-attendance at classes, or various and assorted other inappropriate behaviors, taking students out of the U.S. doesn't make these problems go away. The overseas setting is a reflection of the U.S. campus and problems that exist in one exist in the other. Generally, because of smaller numbers and careful selection from a prescreened pool, the problems overseas have occurred less frequently than domestically, but they do exist. And in a study abroad environment these problems can pose greater challenges and they must be dealt with by smaller staff support teams or even by a single individual.

The reality is that college students are increasingly accustomed to a good deal of hand-holding and supervision and, while direct enrollment is a worthy goal, the need for strong support and guidance must also be a part of a successful paradigm.

Second, the goals of education abroad today are far more diverse than they were in the twenties, when the participants were mostly language students and predominantly upper class and female. Study abroad was for polishing students' language skills and providing the cultural cachet that came with international sophistication. Today's students have a much wider array of goals. Some students may be seeking a better understanding of international institutions like the European Union; others may want some direct contact with the business cul-

ture of a country or a region; the range of excellent motivations is as diverse as the inventory of majors on campus. In most academic disciplines students can be exposed, not only to different answers to the key questions of the field, but to different questions as well.

Beyond the strictly academic dimension, what we hope, and should expect, is that a student’s goals will focus on the world that they are experiencing, and not so much on themselves. That they will seek to understand, not complain about, the unfamiliar, the uncomfortable, and the somewhat disconcerting aspects of the host culture.

The key point is that to meet the wide array of goals, we need diversification in programming as well—a one-size-fits-all approach will not serve us well in the decades to come.

Third, there has been a good deal of effort to “Americanize” the study abroad experience. From course syllabi to pedagogy to standards for credits and grades, there has been pressure to recreate in the overseas classroom many of the characteristics which students are used to in the U.S.: participatory classes, clear course goals and requirements, and transparent grading standards. In short, we want them to go abroad but we don’t want them to necessarily partake of other and perhaps inferior educational systems.

It’s hard to argue that this isn’t good pedagogy but it certainly isn’t local pedagogy. Often lost in this effort is exposure to the local system and ways of education. This balance varies widely from country to country and program to program. Our point is simply that we need to make sure that in serving the market needs of U.S. students and those that send them, we don’t neutralize the many positive benefits of exposure to ways of doing things that are very different and perhaps equally beneficial to students.

As well, in order to be accepted on campuses, overseas study has conformed to a good deal of administrative structure in design and development. So, for example, the “45 session - 50 minute model” of

course instruction that is all but standard on U.S. college campuses is now virtually standard overseas. However, if a good many of our goals in study abroad are not related to cognitive but rather affective learning, we question whether adherence to this model is the right way to go. Our view is that a more pluralistic view of learning models should be adopted for study abroad. Community engagement and related activities play a far more important role in a foreign environment and are important learning opportunities. Developing ways to integrate these activities into the curriculum on an equal footing with classroom learning would greatly serve the goals of study abroad.

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Fourth, a good deal of the comparative learning that comes from study abroad is done informally rather than formally, and over a longer period of time than just the actual sojourn overseas. We believe that a real opportunity exists to do work prior to departure, while overseas, and upon return to help students tease out various comparative cultural issues and solidify the learning opportunities that the overseas experience provides. This is easy to say, hard to do. The wide variety of programming, campus considerations, and student motivations involved make execution a real challenge. However, this is not a reason to give up. We believe some distance learning technologies provide a real opportunity in this regard and should be considered.

Next, we believe that it is high time that some institutions re-think their policies on grades, grading, and the translation of grades to home institution

transcripts for students who study abroad. We believe, as do most others, that it is necessary to develop strategies to keep students on task. But many of the approaches that are employed today are based on anecdotal evidence and on assumptions that are merely asserted and not necessarily grounded in fact. This doesn't make them wrong, just less likely to be right. Our own research indicates that systems which record grades but don't include overseas grades in the calculation of GPA's are likely to work best in heightening student motivation. Our research also indicates that good students are good students anywhere and therefore grading overseas is probably less important than we might believe in capturing student's academic imagination and cultural interests, and achieving our goals.

Grades and GPAs also figure prominently in study abroad admission policies. Many schools and programs use a student's prior grade point average to qualify students for study abroad and there is a good deal of conversation around the right minimum GPA. We do not believe that this is the right approach. Our research shows that a student's GPA average at home is a good predictor of the grades that student will earn abroad. But does this fact really argue in favor of excluding a student with a 2.5 GPA? This student may also earn a 2.5 abroad while others are earning higher grades but so what? If he or she is a 2.5 student, that result is no disgrace. Why deny this student the benefits of a study abroad experience? We would much rather see selection based on attributes of maturity, attitude, ambition, and sincere efforts to succeed, although of course we realize that these are more difficult to measure.

Finally, it has become fashionable these days to assign a high priority to academic rigor and to define it in extremely narrow terms. It is common to suggest that anything less than hard work and type-A anxiety over the process will not lead to learning. But we need to remember that differences in academic culture contribute to perceptions of rigor, although these perceptions may not always be accurate.

For example, many universities in other countries have a culture and style of teaching that is significantly different from that of most American institutions. It is often only at the highest level that courses are discussion-oriented, and lectures are the norm in the first two or three years of study. Moreover, the lectures may closely follow the readings and not explore areas of the subject matter beyond the readings. This difference in the academic culture frequently disappoints our students and they often do not consider their courses to be as challenging as those they take at their home universities. We would argue, and experience has shown, that it is only years later, after the impact of the total experience has sunk in, that students can really understand and appreciate the value of their courses and the other dimensions of their time overseas.

We believe, as well, that non-classroom activities bring an important contribution to learning outcomes. Learning need not be painful and fun is not only OK, but a good thing. The best courses and the best kinds of community engagement can be challenging and require effort but they need not be unpleasant; we all know that courses work best when they are enjoyable. Moreover, we should recognize that the travel and other “non-academic” aspects of study abroad that some eschew as frivolous can in fact contribute a lot to the learning experience.

Study abroad is a wonderful opportunity for students in any field of study to learn a good deal, not only related to their major interests but also about the world in which they live and how they fit into that world. As study abroad professionals, we can help assure that the major commitment a student makes to this endeavor becomes a high-payoff investment. Thinking about and perhaps re-thinking some of our practices might well be the key to assuring our future and the futures of those we serve.



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