

our view

A Research Agenda for Study Abroad

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

cīee

This is the fifth 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. Previous topics include “How Are We Doing?”, which addresses student goals and awareness; “Standards” in study abroad; “A CIEE Eye for the Study Abroad Guy...or Girl” which discusses dress, attitudes, and behavior of students which affects their cultural engagement abroad; and “Parents, Pills, & Pandering” which deals with Millennial Generation parents, the reality of prescribed medication today, and how study abroad is, and should be, different than a semester at college here in the U.S. We **welcome your comments and requests** for additional copies at any time to **editor@ciee.org**.

Someone once said that academic life was for people who had burning questions they just had to answer, or for those who wanted to chew on ideas or issues. There is more than just a little truth in these statements: academic life is more and more centered on research, and publications and scholarly work form the basis of promotion and tenure decisions. It is not surprising, given the need to publish or perish, that the results of some of this research ends up being of dubious quality or utility. Nonetheless, there are pressing questions to explore in virtually every field of endeavor—and never enough time, money, or people to find the answers. This is particularly true of study abroad. After some 70 years of study abroad as we understand the term today, there are still a wide variety of things we'd like and need to know about student learning beyond our national borders.

Last year, while planning the 2005 CIEE Annual Conference, we said, “Wouldn't it be great if we could harness the know-how, commitment, understanding, and experience of conference attendees and focus that intellectual energy on a research agenda for study abroad?” For those of you who attended the conference and participated in the small-table research discussions during the Academic Consortium (AC) breakfast, we thank you. A wide range of interesting and engaging ideas emerged there. In this *Our View*, we'll summarize the results of that effort, combine the suggested ideas with our own thinking, and begin to outline the research agenda that we promised at the end of the breakfast.

More than three hundred people participated in the breakfast and participants at almost thirty tables identified either a hypothesis they would like to see tested and/or a topic they would like to better understand. We have summarized those hypotheses and questions into five categories: Student Decision-Making, Student Preparation, Tipping

Points, Learning Outcomes, and Utility. It is important to note that while our goal was to gather research hypotheses, most of the material we received was in the form of questions rather than hypotheses: “Can we better understand...?” “How do we know that...?” “What can we do to improve...?”

It is no accident that so many of the issues raised took the form of questions. People in study abroad, while interested in research, are by and large neither academics nor researchers, but academic administrators. The point isn’t that they are not scholars: many are very scholarly. But they are practitioners, and confronted with the everyday problems

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of program design, execution, and administration, they are interested in information that helps them do their jobs more effectively. Like all people charged with management responsibility, they are interested in what works, why it works, and how to implement what they learn into what they do. We at CIEE are committed to carrying out studies that don’t seek merely to create knowledge for knowledge sake, but that aim to collect data and provide interpretations that study abroad professionals can use to improve their own practices, enhancing the learning of their students.

Let’s look more closely at each of the five topics that emerged at the AC breakfast—both what people wanted to know and how we can go about addressing those issues.

Decision-Making

There were a lot of questions about how students decide to study abroad. Practitioners would like to better understand the participant decision-making process and how various factors influence that process. While there is a good deal of folk wisdom about what motivates students to go abroad, there is very little hard data. We know all too little about whether students are pursuing their own goals or are influenced by others—faculty, study abroad advisors, friends, parents. We don't know the extent to which students are aware of their own goals when they decide to go abroad, and to what extent their decision *to go* abroad is linked to their choice about *where to go*. Is the student thinking about what he or she could get out of a given program? If he or she is thinking about the educational possibilities of a given program, are other factors—cost, the presence of a close friend on the program, the urging of a parent to choose a “safe” location, etc.—overwhelming his or her learning goals?

These are not simple questions to answer. Like all behavioral topics, there is a good deal of noise in the system and it is difficult to isolate variables. So, for example, how do we factor in a student's desire to be with friends and have fun while abroad? How do we square a student's presumably sincere desire to improve second language proficiency with the fact that he or she opts to enroll in a short-term program rather than a semester or a year abroad?

Student decision-making is clearly a rich area for research. The influences in preference selection are so complex that isolating them is challenging—yet it is precisely the complexity of variables and process that makes the need for data so important. Understanding more about how students plan and respond to multiple influences will help us be as effective in advising our students as they need us to be.

Preparation

The questions posed in this area centered on how best to prepare students for their experience abroad. Practitioners have developed a wide variety of approaches to preparing students prior to departure. Pre-departure orientations range from intensive intercultural training programs delivered over a period of weeks or months to short-term sessions led by study abroad professionals, faculty, or former student participants. Topics range from the practical to the academic, and materials take the form of home-grown manuals and handouts to popular books and planning guides.

Our guess is that participants at the breakfast raised so many questions about student preparation because there is too little data on the impact of pre-departure orientation in general, and on the impact of pre-departure versus on-site orientations in particular. Our own experience tells us that in many study abroad offices, and especially in small offices with few staff, it's a real challenge simply to attend to the multitude of administrative details that now go into getting students abroad. As a result, too little attention is paid to preparing students. There is often little integration between pre-departure and on-site orientation, and there is no clear sense that the activities and materials that are used to prepare students, prior to departure and on-site, are in fact preparing the students well for living and studying in a new and challenging environment.

Here too, there is a substantial payoff in knowing more. The questions posed at our breakfast indicate that study abroad professionals are interested in orientation research that would provide information about what sorts of design, content, and activities are most effective in preparing students. In short, practitioners want to know best practices for student preparation based on solid empirical data.

Tipping Points

Bill Cressey of CIEE suggested at the AC breakfast that Malcolm Gladwell’s term “tipping point” could be useful as we consider different ways to enhance the learning of our students abroad. As Bill noted, when he lived in New York during the Giuliani administration he witnessed a then-innovative approach to reducing crime. This approach, based on chaos theory, sought to reduce crime—chaos in the system—through targeted actions such as preventing “squeegee guys” from washing car windows at intersections and demanding money of drivers, and

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discouraging the painting of graffiti on subway cars. These actions successfully reduced chaos by targeting certain types of petty crimes: they served as tipping points that contributed to an impressive reduction of more serious criminal behavior in the city. What sorts of interventions could we take to improve our programming, particularly our ability to positively influence the intercultural learning of our students? What are those things that influence student learning, in but especially outside the classroom? What are the tipping points? Could they be riding a bus, eating out, having dinner with their homestay family, joining a sports team, partaking in a service project or internship—or maybe just getting one’s laundry done (a challenge in much of the world)?

There are many such tipping points for students abroad—and it’s clear that one student’s tipping point will elicit no more than a ho hum from another. For the committed language student, dreaming in the language may serve as a milestone

—a tipping point—that signals that all of his or her efforts to learn the language are succeeding, as language and life begin unconsciously to integrate. For a beginning language student, on the other hand, the tipping point might occur through something as simple as asking for, and finding, the toilet in a crowded store or restaurant. To a student outside the U.S. for the first time in his or her life, the pulsing lights of Tokyo, the astonishment at the crowded subways, and the activity of life on a downtown street may provide tipping points.

Students bring a variety of needs, expectations, and experiences to study abroad—and they are developmentally at very different places for dealing with and profiting from an intercultural experience. Tipping points, then, will clearly vary significantly by student and location. As a first step to better understanding these influences, we believe it would be helpful to identify a developmental model—either an existing model or one yet to be designed—to describe student behavior that typically occurs at various stages of development. Agreeing on a model that would provide study abroad professionals with a common conceptual base and terminology to describe student behavior would allow us to test the extent to which different sorts of interventions—tipping points—can predictably serve to advance students along the developmental and learning continuum.

Outcomes

There is a good deal of academic interest today in educational outcomes. For many years, learning was often thought of in terms of input: what activities students were called upon to do in class and how many class sessions were required for a course. Today, educators are increasingly asking, “So what? Isn’t education really about what you learn, rather than what you do? Isn’t output, not input, what really matters?”

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Both are important. Not every input has to achieve a specific output. Learning is the sum total of a range of experiences, and outcomes result not from a single event, but from the collective totality of those activities. Outcomes range from the cognitive to the affective to the behavioral, from what we know, to what we feel, to how we behave. If the sole purpose of study abroad were to advance cognitive knowledge, it is unlikely that there would be significant support on campuses for studying abroad. While there is much to learn overseas, many, perhaps most, of the advantages of studying abroad are affective and behavioral. The driving force behind study abroad has been to help students think about the world and other cultures in different, more discerning, and more open ways; not only to change the way students think, but to change the way they feel and behave.

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Many of the issues raised at the AC breakfast were concerned with outcomes. How **does** study abroad impact students? What **are** the implications for learning in the short and long term? While many studies have been conducted, there is still a good deal about learning abroad outcomes that remains to be discovered. We believe that there would be significant value in carrying out long-term longitudinal research, à la the Framingham Heart Study, which would focus on the impact of study abroad, over time, on the learning of a cohort of former student participants. The Framingham study, in identifying biological and environmental risk factors of 5,000 citizens of Framingham, Massachusetts

over a fifty-year period, has revolutionized the treatment of heart disease and prevention. In a similar vein, a longitudinal study of former study abroad participants, perhaps from a single U.S. institution, would have enormous value in allowing us to identify factors, environmental and learner-specific, that contribute over time to various learning outcomes. Such a study would not merely provide a single snapshot of the impact of environmental factors on a group; instead, this approach would allow us, perhaps over twenty years, to track individual learners and trace the lasting impact of study abroad in their lives and careers.

Utility

The most important utility question that was addressed at the AC breakfast, one that we think deserves to be treated separately from the discussion of study abroad outcomes, is the extent to which employers value study abroad. Limited research done in this area suggests that while company Presidents and CEOs increasingly espouse the value of study abroad, neither campus recruiters nor HR directors seem to place much value on it. The scope of research in this area has been limited. We are convinced that more research is needed, in particular studies that focus on the extent to which companies show that they value, in their hiring and promotion practices, the sorts of knowledge, skills, perspectives, and values that study abroad professionals, among others, associate with studying abroad.

Many study abroad professionals believe that if those responsible for hiring and promoting regarded study abroad the same way they do, say, leadership activities, demand for study abroad outside the academy would grow, and study abroad enrollments would rise even faster than they are rising now. This makes sense to us: career-focused students do what is required to get ahead, and faculty who may now be skeptical about the value of study abroad would

presumably give their best students more encouragement to enroll in programs that provide opportunities to acquire the knowledge and skills that employers value.

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This is an area that clearly requires research with a broader focus than studies that have been done to date. We need to know to what extent study abroad is valued in employment decisions. We need to understand what it is that employers, as well as faculty and parents, believe study abroad can or cannot provide. Is there evidence that some stakeholders understand that different sorts of experiences abroad can provide for very different sorts of learning? Do some believe that students who study abroad acquire types of knowledge and skills that they would not have learned had they stayed on the home campus?

Where To From Here?

First and foremost, thanks to everyone who participated in Miami. From the hypothesis we collected that contained this bit of wisdom—“A dunce who studies abroad is better than one who doesn’t”—to the many other interesting and even provocative ideas that participants proposed, we measure the breakfast a great success. CIEE is not in a position to research every topic raised. But we think that, taken together, they provide a rich and promising outline for future research.

Where CIEE is concerned, it’s our plan to work on four parts of this research agenda.

First, we intend to research the employment issue, which we think is the most relatively straightforward of the questions raised, and to have at least preliminary data available in late 2006. If we discover, among other things, that employers talk positively about study abroad but don't demonstrate that they value it through hiring and promoting, then we believe there are ripe opportunities for advocacy that would aim to change perceptions about the impact of study abroad.

Second, we'll carry out a study to explore how students make decisions about studying abroad. The results of this research will allow us to understand how students set goals for going abroad, to what extent they rely on their own or others goals in selecting programs, and to identify ways that we can use this knowledge in advising them about appropriate program options.

Third, we are now designing a long-range study that will explore how various program features and different types of student behavior impact intercultural and second language learning—two learning domains that, we hypothesize, are to some extent related. We believe that research in this area is critically important: the results will inform future decisions about how we can best intervene to support the learning of our students abroad.

Finally, we will bid this year for a host institution to work with in developing and implementing a longitudinal study on study abroad, a project to track former participants that will continue for the next twenty years. We will provide startup funding for the first three to five years and seek other funding sources to maintain this research over the long term.

We look forward to seeing you in Seville in November, at which time we'll report on our progress in each of these areas. In the meantime, if you have further ideas and thoughts that we haven't captured here, or other burning questions, please get in touch at editor@ciee.org.



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