

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SHORT-TERM STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AMONG PARTICIPATING CSU STUDENTS

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Abstract

Study abroad programs have recently been shortening durations in an effort to recruit students who would not have been able to participate in a traditional yearlong program. While this has successfully augmented the number of applicants, it may undermine the purpose of these programs, to provide students with an educational experience that will build intercultural competence. In today's interconnected world students in higher education need the exposure to foreign cultures that is offered through study abroad programs in order to develop intercultural competence and be competitive in a job market that is increasingly becoming multicultural. While exposure to foreign cultures is undoubtedly valuable, simply shipping a student off to another country for a short period of time seems to defy the conventional idea of study abroad programs: that longer is better. This study, through interviews of study abroad program directors and students from California State University (CSU) campuses, seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of short-term study abroad programs in developing the intercultural competence of students.

Background and Introduction

As the trends of globalization gain momentum, the ability to communicate effectively in intercultural situations has become ever more important. Businesses have been on the forefront of intercultural development. Since the ability to communicate across various cultures is important for businesses looking to compete in the global economy, thousands of dollars have been poured into the development of evaluation tools. These tools are intended to evaluate the efficiency of overseas immersion programs; through which businesses are able to significantly improve employees' intercultural competence. Because business invest money and time in these employees and programs, it is important for them to quickly identify areas that need improvement.

Several variables have led to the expanding interactions among the world's cultures, including technological advancements in the spread of information. While businesses have responded to globalization in a manner that has allowed them to educate their employees in intercultural communication and develop their

intercultural competence rapidly and efficiently, universities in the United States have failed to put forth the same effort. One thing is clear, schools of higher education are expected to respond by providing students with international education programs designed to build their intercultural competence.

One response by universities was the implementation of study abroad programs. Study abroad is not a new idea. In fact, the University of Delaware has began their study abroad program in 1923 (Chieffo and Griffiths 166). According to Chieffo and Griffiths—both faculty at the University of Delaware—the program consisted of “traditional long-term programs” for its first half-century. It was not until the 1970's that the University of Delaware began hosting shorter terms abroad, and that was with the creation of an interim winter semester. With the creation of shorter terms abroad, program enrollment grew significantly, doubling in 1979 and growing rapidly since.

This demographic trend reflects the growing need of programs to be shorter in duration in order to accommodate more

students of varying backgrounds. *The Guide to Successful Short-Term Programs Abroad* quotes a report from 1990 called the *National Task Force on Undergraduate Education Abroad* which remarks that “[f]or students who are older, of minority background, employed (46 percent of full-time students under age 25 are employed at least part-time), disabled, or have limited funds, study abroad is not perceived as an option. The more typical study abroad models and structures mostly ignore the needs of such students” (Spencer xv). Further, the guide notes that just over a decade ago, many students did not study abroad, especially those noted. In fact, fewer than 5% of undergraduates in the US study abroad and “fewer students are participating in traditional ‘Junior Year Abroad’ programs and are opting for semester programs or—even more frequently—short-term programs that last less than eight weeks” (Chieffo and Griffiths 1). The introduction of short-term programs has created the opportunity for a wider range of students to gain an intercultural experience.

The California State University (CSU) system has a study abroad program that is universally available to all its 23 campuses called International Programs—hereafter referred to as IP. This program only offers study abroad terms that span the academic year, though. The question “why an academic year?” is listed in the FAQ section of the CSU website. The answer lists the following two points: “to get the most out of the study abroad experience, personally and academically” and “to allow time to achieve advanced language, academic and cultural coping skills” (“The California State University”). The website admits “it takes time to go beyond tourism and to undergo the transformation from visitor to resident.” Dwyer’s conclusion in her research on the impact of study abroad program duration supports IP’s claim and states that “long held beliefs that studying abroad for a full year has [a] more significant and enduring impact on students” (161).

Since IP has only academic yearlong programs, most of the CSU campuses have created their own separate programs, which include short-term programs. This study will look at the various short-term study abroad programs—considered in this case to be of an eight week or less duration—of California State University campuses. The focus of this study will be on the ability of the short-term programs to develop the intercultural competence of students, as opposed to a semester or yearlong program.

The American Council on Education has published several reports on international education in the United States. A recent report stated “in spite of an apparent growing national interest in international education, relatively few undergraduates gain international or intercultural competence in college” (Hayward 1). The report cautions that if the United States fails in the international education of its students, it faces the possibility of falling behind other major players in the world in that its citizens will lack the abilities to effectively communicate in multicultural situations (Hayward 1; Deardorff 15). Therein lies a problem, however. Defining intercultural competence and methods by which students can gain it has proven to be difficult. This is also an issue this study will address.

Defining Intercultural Competence

The first step for this project will be to define intercultural competence in a manner that could be used to evaluate the effectiveness of short-term study abroad programs at CSU campuses. Dr. Darla Deardorff has presented what is considered the first definition of intercultural competence reached as a consensus by intercultural experts. Her research arrived at the following definition: “Intercultural competence is the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on specific

attitudes, intercultural knowledge, skills and reflection” (Deardorff 5). Applying this definition to a particular evaluation is an area Deardorff admitted would require further research.

For this study, the evaluation will be specifically of students who will engage in and/or have engaged in short-term and long-term study abroad programs through CSU campuses. Based on Deardorff’s definition, this study will use the following four points to interpret data gathered and evaluate a specific study abroad program:

1) Attitudes: Students will have attitudes that will vary greatly, but can be measured to a certain degree. Specifically, attitudes of respect (respect of other cultures’ beliefs, value systems, etc.), openness, and curiosity and discovery (Deardorff 15) will be measured. It is important to note a student’s attitudes before participation in a study abroad program so that they can be compared to the same student’s attitudes after. The evaluation on this point will be based on changes in attitudes that promote intercultural competence.

2) Knowledge: Knowledge includes “cultural self-awareness which can be viewed as the crucial starting point for beginning to understand other cultures. Deep understanding and knowledge of other cultures—especially of others’ world views—are also key in gaining intercultural competence” (Deardorff 15). Knowledge encompasses several other variables, including an understanding of sociolinguistics, or how language is used in particular contexts in social settings. This type of knowledge can arguably only be gained through the experiential education of study abroad programs.

Many would argue that classroom-based instruction would be sufficient to gaining intercultural knowledge. While this may impact a student’s intercultural knowledge to a certain degree, “[a] recent study found that

student level and intercultural competency were virtually unaffected by participation in traditional classroom-based intercultural communication courses...direct experience with people from other cultures is likely the most effective way to improve intercultural competency” (Pennington 1). Evaluation based on knowledge will look at how a student’s knowledge and awareness expanded to include very specific information about cultures they experienced as well as their own culture.

3) Skills: Deardorff suggests that, though skills and knowledge were deemed to be separate components of intercultural competence, they are connected and essential to each other. Skills, for this case, are the skills necessary to effectively assimilate and interpret cultural data. This includes communication skills (listening and observing) and cognitive skills (analyzing, evaluating and relating). Though these are skills that are developed through a variety of classes, fundamental in a university student’s education, they are not always necessarily related to the development of intercultural competence, thus suggesting that intellectual parameters are critical in this process. Such skills can be developed to respond to an intercultural context, however.

4) Internal and External Outcomes: These parameters are to be measured after participation in a study abroad program and encompass the desired results upon students. Internal outcomes “include elements of adaptability, flexibility, empathy and...adopting an ethnorelative view” (Deardorff 16). These outcomes should effectively result in a change of reference for students. The desired external outcomes should result in a student “behaving and communicating appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations...where appropriateness is the avoidance of violating valued rules and effectiveness is the achievement of valued objectives” (Deardorff 16). This aspect will undoubtedly be the most

difficult to measure and evaluate. By discovering how students have treated intercultural situations since their return from a study abroad program, an accurate measure of the internal and external outcomes should be possible, though.

Methodology

With intercultural competence defined for the purposes of this study, the next step would be to collect data. Since this study will be limited to the California State University system, data will be collected solely from the 23 campuses listed at www.calstate.edu. A questionnaire will be developed to evaluate the four parameters of intercultural competence mentioned above. Using a Likert scale, the questionnaire will be administered to students that had already participated in a study abroad program. Study abroad programs will be divided into three categories—short-term (8 weeks or less), semester long and yearlong. Data will be collected from all 23 CSU campuses, with the surveys administered by the directors of the study abroad programs at each university and will be administered through the US Postal Service for expedience.

Surveys will also be administered to a control group—time permitting. The group will consist of students currently taking (or have taken) courses in intercultural communication. The results will then be compared to determine the effectiveness of study abroad programs as a tool for building intercultural competence versus traditional classroom-based instruction.

The survey administered to all students will also contain an open-ended short response question. The question will ask a student what the single most important thing they learned was (either through the classroom or while abroad) and why. This data can be used to explain significant differences between classroom instruction and study abroad learning. However, the

evaluation of this data is not quantifiable and not as reliable as the survey data.

Limitations

Time is a significant limiting factor in this study. The number of results will be limited, especially in respect to the control group. In order for the control group to be completely accurate, surveys will need to be taken by students in intercultural communications classes at all of the 23 CSU campuses that data is collected from.

Also, this study will be primarily focused on students who have already returned from a study abroad term. So doing provides the fastest way to gather results, but is unable to adequately measure the development of student attitudes that resulted from a term abroad. In order to compromise, the questionnaire will include questions asking students questions in relationship to their “pre-exposure” attitudes.

Another limitation is the manner in which the surveys will be administered. Again, for expedience, the US Postal Service offers the best option. However, this limits the ability to control the issuance of the surveys. Surveys given out in this manner can still be collected and organized according to school, however.

Projected Findings

This study seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of the short-term study abroad programs of CSU campuses in the development of intercultural competence based on a specific definition of the term. The effectiveness of the short-term programs will be compared to that of other semester long programs and the yearlong programs of the IP. Also, results will be compared to a control group taken from students participating in intercultural communication classes.

The data I am collecting and evaluating should yield information that will be helpful

for determining ways to improve the educational quality of short-term study abroad

programs, including their ability to build intercultural competence in participants.

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