

Study Abroad Business Courses: Establishing Importance, Improving Motivation and Overcoming Obstacles

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Abstract. Studying abroad has long been associated with positive outcomes for students, better retention, and greater success. In particular, research has shown that studying abroad leads students to higher levels of global awareness and self-actualization. Among the most prominent areas of intellectual and emotional growth were functional knowledge and global independence. These traits gained in the study abroad experience correlate well with the desires of future employers. They want graduates with global leadership skills who are prepared to work in multicultural settings, and who can adapt to a variety of cultural workstyles. This paper examines the latest research on education abroad courses and, calling on the combined experience of the two authors, outlines steps for establishing the importance of these courses in the minds of both business faculty and students. The paper also identifies strategies for increasing student motivation to participate in the study abroad experience. This paper will be most valuable to first-time leaders of education abroad courses, especially in business disciplines but will also serve as a refresher for experienced leaders of education abroad courses.

Keywords: education abroad, global awareness, educational barriers, motivating students.

1. Introduction

Studying abroad as an academic venture has long been associated with highly desirable academic outcomes for students, better retention, and greater success. In particular, research has shown that studying outside the home country leads to higher levels of global awareness and self-actualization. The *Georgia Learning Outcomes of Students Studying Abroad Research Initiative* (GLOSSARI)¹ study conducted by researchers at the University of Georgia measured the individual growth while abroad for a wide range of students. Among the most prominent areas of intellectual and emotional growth were functional knowledge, global independence, and cultural relativism.² These traits, gained in the study abroad

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1. Sutton, Richard C. and Rubin, Donald L. (2004), "The GLOSSARI Project: Initial Findings from a System-Wide Research Initiative on Study Abroad Learning Outcomes", *Frontiers, The Journal for Study Abroad*, Vol. X.

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experience, correlate well with the desires of future employers who are telling colleges and universities to prepare students to work in multicultural settings, develop global leadership skills, and learn to adapt to a variety of cultural work styles. It is no longer enough to read *Kiss, Bow or Shake Hands*³ in order to brush up on the cultural cues before traveling abroad: today's students need to be prepared from the start for the challenges of working in a global marketplace. While this rings true across the academy, it is perhaps even more vital in International Business.

Yet while nearly 20,000,000 U.S. students were expected to enroll in higher education in 2017-2018⁴ just shy of 342,000 studied abroad that year⁵ constituting less than 2% of the total student body. Of the 342,000 who did take the plunge, 21% or approximately 72,000 were business majors, the second most popular broad-category field behind STEM majors. Since 372,000 business degrees were conferred that same year, it follows that about only about 19% of all business majors graduate with an overseas experience during their undergraduate program. While this percentage is notably higher than the experience of all students it only scratches the surface in a major where international experience is vital to working in the field.

Given the critical importance of this training, with employers ranking international exposure as the second most important factor when looking at schools,⁶ it might stand to reason that more business programs, and specifically International Business programs would make studying abroad an integral component, if not a mandatory one, of any degree. In 2014 Daniel, Xie, and Kedia replicated their earlier study that examined the various components employers favor in potential employees. The researchers learned, and confirmed a decade later, that “an appreciation for cross-cultural differences is the most important international skill sought by companies for both professional staff and line management employees”.⁷ While there are a variety of ways these skills can be acquired, studying abroad when properly designed, as Vande Berg, Paige, and Lou point out⁸ can be an effective way to achieve gains in intercultural competencies. Combining these important factors (the lack of participation, the

2. Ibid.

3. Morrison, Terri and Conaway, Wayne A. (2006), *Kiss, Bow or Shake Hands*, Avon, MA: Adams Media.

4. NCES, Digest of Education Statistics (2019), https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_105.30.asp

5. Open Doors Study (2019), <https://www.iie.org/en/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors/Fact-Sheets-and-Infographics>

6. NCES, Digest of Education Statistics (2019), <https://www.studyinternational.com/news/6-things-employers-look-for-in-new-business-graduates/>

7. Daniel, Shirley J., Xie, Fujiao, and Kedia, Ben (2014), “Study: U.S. Business Needs for Employees with International Expertise”, NAFSA 2014 Annual Conference and Expo.

8. Vande Berg, M., Balkcum, A., Scheid, M., and Whalen, B. J. (2004), “The Georgetown University Consortium Project: A Report at the Halfway Mark”, *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, X: pp. 101-116.

agreement that intercultural skills are important for employers, and the ability to deliver those skills abroad) it is surprising, and perhaps even concerning, that more IB programs do not encourage greater participation.

Certainly, there have been attempts to address the lack of student participation in study abroad through local actions at college and university campuses as well as with national programs and policy efforts. In 2005, The Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Commission was established to examine the issues and make recommendations for the future. Among these recommendations is to envision, develop, and fund a structure that will allow for 1,000,000 U.S. students to study abroad each year. Unfortunately, despite many attempts, bills such as the Simon Study Abroad Act continue to languish in Congressional committees and on the floor of Congress. In addition, restrictive financial aid policies at many U.S. institutions prevent the smooth transfer of funds to support studying abroad. The result is that students are largely left to their own devices to find the means to pay for international experiences and fewer students, especially those from first-generation college-bound families, non-traditional students and minority students are excluded from participation. Additional barriers, such as familial, psychological, and social barriers have been well documented in the field^{9 10}. While these barriers lower participation among students, the low rate of participation is not, however, caused by a lack of desire among students.

2. Motivation and Intent to Study Abroad

Studies on student motivations and factors for studying abroad show that nearly 65% of incoming students want to study abroad with a slightly smaller number expecting to be able to avail themselves of an overseas opportunity during their undergraduate careers.^{11 12} Despite these high numbers, less than 10% of all students end up studying abroad before they graduate.¹³ While the numbers are higher for International Business majors, the percentages still fall well short of the goals of many schools and programs. And these students are motivated by a variety of factors that fall in four broad categories: 1) world enlightenment (that is, learning about the world, 2) personal growth, 3) career development, and 4) entertainment.¹⁴ In their 2006 article on motivations to study abroad, Sanchez et

9. Salisbury, Mark H., Umbach, Paul D., Paulsen, Michael B., and Pascarella, Ernest T. (2009), "Going Global: Understanding the Choice Process of the Intent to Study Abroad", *Research in Higher Education*, 50 (2): pp. 119-143.

10. Sanchez, Carol M., Fornerino, Marianela, and Zhang, Mengxia (2006), "Motivations and the Intent to Study Abroad among US, French, and Chinese Students", *Journal of Teaching in International Business*, 18(1): pp. 27-52.

11. Salisbury, *et al.*, *op.cit.*

12. Li, Manyu, Olson, Josephine E., and Frieze, and Irene Hanson (2013), "Students' Study Abroad Plans: The Influence of Motivational and Personality Factors. *Frontiers*", *The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*. Volume XXIII: pp. 73-79.

13. Open Doors, 2017.