

Developing Comparative Study Abroad Programs for MBA Students: Lessons from Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and South Africa

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Abstract. Graduate business education programs have begun to include short-term study abroad classes in an effort to infuse international business skill and intercultural competence in their program structure. The present research chronicles a four-year incremental improvement effort made on a short-term MBA study abroad program based in the United States. Four categories of changes were made over this period. These major changes were implemented in the areas of multiple-country comparative pedagogy, security and safety, delivery of academic content, and after-hours group experiences. Whereas single-country itineraries were offered the first two years of improvement, during the third and fourth years a change was made to move to a comparative curriculum across two adjacent but highly dissimilar countries. Student engagement and learning were noticeably greater during the multiple country itinerary, rather than in single or multiple locations within one country. Lessons and reflections from this multiple-year improvement effort are provided as well as suggestions for future research.

Keywords: experiential education, international education, comparative education, curriculum improvement, international business, political systems, economic education, compare and contrast.

1. Introduction

The economic recession starting in 2008-2009 proved disastrous for many newly graduated business majors as they tried to navigate employment in the bearish environment (Murray 2009). The American university featured as a case study in the present research created a new graduate program in 2009 as a full-time option for young college graduates to pursue an MBA. The traditional part-time MBA program already in place required applicants to have several years of work experience to be admitted. Because of this requirement, students in their early 20's were not able to access the traditional MBA program. The College of Business saw an opportunity to promote a new MBA program to younger adults, but only if additional courses and workshops were included to compensate for the

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applicants' lack of work experience. The new program would be called the Accelerated MBA (AMBA), denoting its one-year completion time on a lock-step track. Although the initial cohort of AMBA students totaled only 14, in its first 10 years of existence the program would grow in popularity, eventually attracting over 80 students to apply each year. To maintain the small classroom environment, the college decided to cap its cohorts to 30 students annually.

The AMBA program attracted students of an average age of 23 with 1 year and less of work experience. The program diverged in several ways from the traditional MBA. First, greater emphasis was placed on professionalism training throughout the year, teaching students how to conduct themselves in professional work relationships. Secondly, the program mandated an internship experience which was not required of older part-time MBA program students. This requirement gave students the chance to acquire skills, display their skills to local organizations, and network among businesses. Thirdly, and central to the present research, International Business and Study Abroad were combined into one intensive course experience that included two weeks abroad to allow students an immersive tour with lessons, visits, and contacts. When a new director was appointed to the AMBA program, the college took the chance to make incremental improvements, in part by using research performed on optimal study abroad experiences. The present research assimilates the previous research on optimal short-term study abroad experiences, chronicles the incremental improvements made in the program over a four-year period, and reports on the effects of adding these improvements on student behaviors and outcomes.

2. Literature Review

Study abroad programs, those in which a student travels out of their domestic country to pursue educational opportunities, have tripled in student enrollments since the early 2000s (Gould 2018; Institute of International Education 2015). Whereas study abroad programs have long been an option for a few college students in the form of a semester, a year, or longer in another country, the bulk of the recent increase in study abroad opportunities has been in the short-term study abroad category, comprised of programs eight weeks or shorter in duration (Donnelly-Smith 2009). This most common type of study abroad program is more affordable and appeals to students who are not willing or able to commit to a longer stay away from their main campus. Some studies have cited short-term study abroad programs as contributing significantly to transformative learning (Chieffo & Griffiths 2004; Gaia 2015; Hachtmann 2012; Nguyen *et al.* 2018; Shiveley & Misco 2015; Walters *et al.* 2016). Other studies criticize short-term programs for their resemblance to a vacation rather than an educational experience and report low levels of impact of such a short length of stay (Coker *et al.* 2018; Donnelly-Smith, 2009; Schroeder *et al.* 2009; Strange & Gibson

2017). Yet other studies find that semester-long programs have a significantly larger impact on student learning than programs lasting a few weeks, but their results emphasize that the costs of the longer stay might not warrant the small but significant difference in outcomes. (DeLoach *et al.* 2019). The following literature review first examines the pedagogy of short-term study abroad and reviews best practices in study abroad program design before moving into a case study of the continuous improvement of the MBA program highlighted in the present research.

2.1. Benefits of Short-Term Study Abroad

Experiential learning is defined as knowledge created through the transformation provided by experience (Kolb 1984). Experiential learning is based in constructivism, wherein the learner's active role in his or her environment is processed to create a knowledge base (Rodriguez & Roberts 2010). In experiential learning educational settings, students learn by processing their sensory input, including their thoughts, feelings, behaviors, surroundings, and activities (Wagenknecht 2011). Experiential learning activities are designed to incorporate various learning styles through concrete experience, reflection, observation, experimentation, and abstract conceptualization (Kolb 1984).

International study abroad programs immerse students in the culture of another nation, and students experience and interpret the cross-cultural encounter (Wagenknecht 2011). Immersion in a different culture is jarring for most students, but this disorientation can produce profound learning opportunities as students process an inundation of sensory information and try to make sense of their new surroundings (Walters *et al.* 2016). Study abroad programs decades ago used to last at least a semester in duration, sometimes stretching even a year or more in length (Dwyer & Peters 2004). However, a desire to improve access to study abroad experiences and to achieve positive outcomes for a larger portion of the student body motivated a widespread adoption of a shorter stay in host countries, anywhere from one week to eight weeks, deemed the short-term study abroad program (Donnelly-Smith 2009). Researchers do not debate whether longer stays in host countries can produce more profound improvement in student outcomes. Longer study abroad programs do have greater impact on student knowledge and skills. What is debated is whether the tradeoff for those improved outcomes is worth the extra expense of months-long stay and the increase in program price out of the reach of most students' budgets (Coker *et al.* 2018).

Studies of the more widely used short-term study abroad programs report many benefits from these programs to student learning outcomes. First, broadly described, going on study abroad develops maturity in young adult students in several ways. Empathy, or being able to view issues from another's perspective, has been found to improve either through empathy scales or through surveys of

student perception of self-growth (Coker *et al.* 2018; Nguyen *et al.* 2018). Similarly, several studies have found that students who study abroad are better able to interact with those from other cultures (Dwyer & Peters 2004; Nguyen *et al.* 2018; Smith & Mitry 2008). Study abroad experiences are correlated with improvement in relationships with others (Coker *et al.* 2018; Dwyer & Peters 2004) and a better understanding of oneself (Coker *et al.* 2018; Dwyer & Peters 2004). The ability to critically reflect on one's presuppositions and test one's beliefs also increases as a result of study abroad experiences (Walters *et al.* 2016). Finally, greater self-efficacy is found in students after study abroad experiences than they possessed before making the trip (Dwyer & Peters 2004; Nguyen *et al.* 2018). These developments of self in students can be applied throughout their adult lives.

Short-term study abroad programs also enhance the collegiate academic setting. Students report greater satisfaction with their educational experiences if they include a study abroad program (Coker *et al.* 2018). Those who go on study abroad show commitment to their studies by choosing to attend graduate school more often than students who do not go on study abroad, and they show increased levels of interest in interdisciplinary or internationally directed studies (Dwyer & Peters 2004; Smith & Mitry 2008). Finally, study abroad programs benefit students by providing enhanced skills sets above those learned in the classroom and revealing potential new career paths that students had not considered previously (Dwyer & Peters 2004).

2.2. Best Practices in Study Abroad Program Design

The positive outcomes studied in prior literature are not guaranteed to result from every study abroad effort. Several best practices have been examined and have been found to improve student outcomes like increased personal maturity, cultural intelligence, and retention of international business course content over time. Achievement of desired outcomes relies on specific instructor and student preparation for the international trip, attitudes and activities during the trip, and reflection and recall after the trip (Roberts & Jones 2009; Tritz & Martin 1997).

Pre-trip Preparation

Much of the literature on best practices for study abroad programs focuses on the preparation before traveling to the host country. This preparation takes the form of educating the student both on the process of study abroad and on the field of international business and host country-specific content (Parkinson 2007; Rodriguez & Roberts 2010). Keeping discussions focused on academic content rather than travel helps to formalize students' attitudes about the experience (Donnelly-Smith 2009; Parkinson 2007). Outlining the purposes and objectives