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# Realizing the Potential of International Education in Leadership Learning

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## Abstract

This chapter explores how study abroad and the presence of international students contributes to students' leadership development, key challenges preventing that potential from being realized, and offers suggestions for improving access to and implementing leadership-focused study abroad and international student programs.

International student mobility offers great potential to provide the cross-cultural engagement opportunities necessary to develop the skills and dispositions to effectively engage in international leadership. However, when it comes to student mobility in and out of the United States (i.e., study abroad and international students), this potential is often unrealized due to issues of access and implementation. This chapter explores how study abroad and the presence of international students contributes to students' leadership development, key challenges preventing that potential from being realized, and offers suggestions for improving access to and implementing leadership-focused study abroad and international student programs. *International student mobility* is a broad term that encompasses the movement of students across national borders for academic study. Within the United States, the term *international students* typically refers to inbound student mobility, typically for an entire academic degree. The term *study abroad*, on the other hand, typically refers to outbound mobility, or students who are enrolled in degree programs within the United States, who take courses and earn credits associated with travel to a different country (see the Institute for International Education [IIE] 2016 *Open Doors* report for an example of this terminology).

## The Potential

**Study Abroad.** According to IIE (2016) *Open Doors* Report, in the 2014/2015 academic year over 300,000 U.S.-based students studied abroad, up more than 50% over the past decade (IIE, 2016). Of those who do study abroad, 63% now do so for fewer than 8 weeks (and often only 2–3 weeks; IIE, 2016). In addition to overall increases in participation over the past decade, there have also been gains in the diversity of students studying abroad, especially with regard to race and major (IIE, 2016).

Although there is scant literature that has established a specific connection between studying abroad and students' leadership learning, research has shown that study abroad can facilitate skills and dispositions related to leadership, such as intercultural, multicultural, and/or global competence. Analyses of data from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, for example, showed that study abroad was significantly related to students' gains in intercultural effectiveness over their 4 years in college (Kligo, Sheets, & Pascarella, 2015). Soria and Johnson (2017), using data from the Student Experiences in the Research University survey, similarly found a significant, positive relationship between studying abroad and students' multicultural competence. However, it is important to note that after controlling for many other on- and off-campus international experiences, Soria and Troisi (2013) found that studying abroad in general was only a weak predictor of self-reported behavioral and affective dimensions of intercultural competency, and was not at all related to students' global/international competency (reflecting knowledge and understanding of global and international issues).

**International Students.** In the 2015/2016 academic year, over one million international students were enrolled in U. S. higher education institutions, an increase of 85% over the past decade; international students make up 5% of the overall U.S. college student population (IIE, 2016). The top sending countries are People's Republic of China (31.5% of all international students studying in the United States), India (15.9%), Saudi Arabia (5.9%), and South Korea (5.8%; IIE 2016).

The research points to the potential for leadership-related courses and programming to have a positive effect on international students' leadership learning (Collier & Rosch, 2016; Collier, Rosch, & Houston, 2017). Other researches have pointed to the positive contribution of leadership program participation, taking courses that emphasize dialogue among diverse students or that include reading on race or ethnicity, participating in community service, and receiving mentoring for personal development to international students' leadership development in college (Glass, 2012; Shalka, 2017).

In addition to promoting international students' leadership development, leadership and programming has the potential to contribute to domestic students' leadership development through facilitating interactions between domestic and international students (Collier et al., 2017). Highlighting the importance of these types of interactions for leadership development for all students, Dugan and Komives (2010) found that sociocultural conversations with peers were a strong predictor of students' socially responsible leadership (SRL) across eight dimensions—consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, citizenship, collaboration, common purpose, controversy with civility, and change. It was the only collegiate experience they examined that predicted all eight dimensions of SRL, and had a larger effect size across all eight dimensions than any other experience variable.

Interactions between domestic and international students also have the potential to help students develop other skills related to leadership. Luo and Jamieson-Drake (2013) found that domestic students who interacted more frequently with international students were also more likely than their non-interactive peers to critically examine their own beliefs and values, and also demonstrated higher levels of skill development in areas such as “relating well to people of different races, nations, or religions” (p. 91). Soria and Troisi (2013) found that interacting with international students in a social setting was a significant, positive predictor of domestic students' self-reported global/international competency, and developing a friendship with an international student was a significant, positive predictor of domestic students' self-reported intercultural competency.

## **The Problems**

**Study Abroad.** Despite the recent growth in study abroad participation, only about 10% of all U.S.-based undergraduate students study abroad (IIE, 2016). According to Berdan and Johannes (2014), the main barriers to study abroad participation for U.S. students are cost, curriculum (e.g., highly structured programs of study, questions about transfer credit, and misperceptions of the alignment of global learning and disciplinary content), and culture (e.g., parochialism, the view that study abroad is something for upper-middle-class White women). These three factors contribute to persistent disparities in study abroad participation; research has consistently noted a significant relationship between intent or actual participation in study abroad and students' socio-economic status, race, gender, and major (e.g., Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2009).

In addition to challenges of access, the proliferation of short-term programs over the past decade raises questions about the quality of these experiences. On the one hand, short-term programs are an important and

effective way of democratizing study abroad participation (Spencer & Tuma, 2007), broadening access for students who might not otherwise be able to go abroad. On the other hand, Engle and Engle (2003) argued that short-term programs require “relatively little in the way of prior linguistic and cultural preparation” and that it may be inappropriate to group short-term programs with other programs that have “intensive, longer-term cultural, linguistic and professional immersion” (p. 2). Others have argued that short-term study abroad programs perpetuate exploitative and postcolonial relationships between students and host countries, promote a consumerist view of cultural exchange, and facilitate tourism rather than true cultural immersion (e.g., Kortegast & Kupo, 2017).

Finally, despite the evidence that study abroad can contribute to the development of leadership-related skills, there is a lack of direct evidence of leadership learning through study abroad participation. Kligo et al. (2015) found that studying abroad was significantly related to gains in SRL over students’ 4 years in college, but this effect disappeared when controlling for participation in other high-impact practices. Soria and Johnson (2017) similarly found that after controlling for other high-impact practices, study abroad had no significant relationship with student’s self-reported leadership learning. Both Kligo et al. and Soria and Johnson, however, noted that their studies only looked at whether students had participated in study abroad programs, without examining differences in length, location, program type, or pedagogy. It may be unreasonable to expect leadership outcomes from study abroad experiences that do not necessarily focus on leadership development.

**International Students.** There are a number of structural barriers that can prevent international students from accessing U.S. higher education. Studying in the United States as an international student is generally quite expensive, with international students sometimes paying three times as much as in-state students at public institutions (Lewin, 2012). Almost two-thirds of international students fund their education through personal and family resources (IIE, 2017); student visas generally come with restrictions that do not allow students to work off campus during their studies (United States Citizenship & Immigration Services, 2018), making it difficult for students without significant family resources to fund their education.

Restrictive student visa policies are another significant barrier to studying in the United States. President Trump’s recently imposed ban on travel to the United States for nationals from a variety of mostly Muslim-majority countries (at the time of writing the list included Chad, Libya, Iran, North Korea, Somalia, Syria, Venezuela, and Yemen, with increased scrutiny of travelers from Iraq) may already be negatively affecting the number of international students in the United States, both through outright visa refusals

and through the potentially growing perception that the United States is not a welcoming or safe place to live for those from other countries (Redden, 2018).

Once they are here, international students also face additional challenges including cultural adaptation, language learning, finding culturally appropriate food, and exclusion from the local community (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010). In particular, multiple studies have pointed to the exclusion and discrimination that international students experience on U.S. campuses, especially those students who present minoritized racial identities (Glass & Westmont, 2014). These discriminatory experiences can have a negative effect on students' sense of belonging, academic success, and engagement in cross-cultural interactions (Glass & Westmont, 2014).

International and domestic students also face a number of barriers that preclude them from engaging in cross-cultural interactions. Language barriers and difficulty understanding accents are important barriers, but cultural barriers can be even bigger hurdles. Both international and domestic students experience "feelings of awkwardness, self-consciousness, overwhelm, and embarrassment" (Lehto, Cai, Fu, & Chen, 2014, p. 846), and can have difficulty understanding different social norms, pronouncing foreign-sounding names, and identifying common interests. When students from the two groups do interact, international students often find their "interactions with domestic students [to be] limited, brief, and unsustainable" (Lehto et al., 2014, p. 844). The fact that interactions that do occur between the two groups tend to remain superficial can be particularly problematic, not just as missed opportunities, but because as Glass, Wongtrirat, and Buus (2015) argued:

contact without context—fleeting, unstructured—may instead be more likely to exacerbate prejudice, lower confidence in one's ability to influence the views of others, and undermine any expectation that diverse student individuals and groups can cooperate to solve mutual problems. (pp. 39-40)

### **Realizing the Potential: Increasing Access and Improving Student Experiences**

There is great potential for international student mobility to contribute to leadership learning and related skill development for both domestic and international students. However, challenges of access and implementation often preclude institutions from realizing these benefits. In the section below, I will describe what the literature tells us about how to increase access and improve student experiences in student mobility programs.

**Study Abroad.** One of the key ways that institutions can increase access to study abroad opportunities is through short-term programs (Spencer & Tuma, 2007). Despite the concerns about the value of these programs, research has shown that they *can* have a positive effect on student's intercultural learning. However, that effect varies widely by program (e.g., Anderson, Lorenz, & White, 2016). Across all types of study abroad programs, but particularly in short-term programs, more attention needs to be paid to how educators intentionally facilitate student learning. As Vande Berg (2007) argued, "in the absence of active intervention in their learning, most United States students just do not learn very effectively at all while abroad" (p. 395).

One resource for educators seeking to be more intentional in facilitating student learning abroad is the Georgetown Consortium Project (Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009), which has identified a number of important components of study abroad experiences that contribute to student learning, including prior language learning, program length, cultural mentoring, dissimilarity between the host culture and students' home culture, and time usage abroad. There are also a number of practice-based resources and standards that can guide educators in creating effective study abroad programs, including a variety of publications from NAFSA: Association of International Educators and the Forum on Education Abroad. The Forum on Education Abroad (2015) and the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS; 2015) have published standards and guidelines for education abroad programming.

In addition to focusing on what happens *during* the study abroad course, educators can maximize the benefits of studying abroad by also engaging with students before and after their time abroad (CAS, 2015; Forum on Education Abroad, 2015). Educator involvement before and after study abroad experiences is key. In studying service-based alternative break programs, Niehaus et al. (2017) found that students were able to integrate learning before, during, and after their alternative break, but that educators were rarely intentionally promoting this integration. They argued that with more educator intentionality and support for integrative learning, students might be able to engage in more complex forms of integrative learning, maximizing the learning potential of short-term programs like alternative breaks and short-term study abroad.

Although leadership development may not be a stated learning outcome of all study abroad programs, for those programs that do seek to facilitate students' leadership development there are a number of leadership-focused study abroad examples in the literature that educators can look to for ideas on how to engage students in leadership-specific learning while abroad. For example, Montgomery and Arensdorf (2012) described an approach to leadership-focused study abroad courses at a Midwestern university. The key strategy used across these courses is a focus on the cognitive, attitudinal, and

behavioral development necessary to engage in global leadership, spanning the time before, during, and after the study abroad experience itself. Niehaus, O'Rourke, and Ostick (2012) described a different approach for leadership learning abroad, focusing on student-generated "global leadership development plans" (p. 116). Students complete a global leadership assessment at the beginning of the class, use the results to develop an individual plan to improve on their strengths and mitigate their weaknesses, carry out that plan during the course (on campus and abroad), assess their progress, and create a post-course "future development plan" to continue to develop their global leadership capacities over time.

**International Students.** As with study abroad programs, there are a number of resources to help educators improve the experiences of international students on their campuses, including publications from NAFSA and CAS (2015). One key strategy for improving international students' experiences on campus is promoting their curricular and cocurricular engagement. Glass and Westmont (2014) found that cocurricular activities, including participating in leadership programs, had a positive direct effect on international students' sense of belonging, and a positive indirect effect on international students' academic success and cross-cultural interactions. Glass et al. (2015) also identified the importance of faculty–student interactions for international students. Yet, they also argued that not all professors have the cultural competence nor culturally inclusive pedagogical practice to provide this positive support for international students. In addition to focusing on getting international students more engaged on campus, educators should also focus on increasing the cultural competence of faculty, staff, and other students in order to improve international student engagement.

Leadership programs in particular can be a key way of engaging international students on campus in meaningful ways. Glass (2012) found that participating in leadership development programs was positively associated with international students' perceptions of campus climate. Other researchers, however, have pointed to the different needs of international and domestic students coming into leadership programs. Collier and Rosch (2016) found that international students may have a weaker motivation and feeling of responsibility to lead than do domestic students, and that international and domestic students have different "pathway[s] toward being an effective transformational leader" (p. 43). As a result, Collier and Rosch (2016) suggested that leadership educators might organize additional workshops targeted at international students to focus on social-normative motivation to supplement existing leadership development programming. Dugan's critical perspectives approach described in Chapter 3 provides essential advice on how leadership theories and models should be carefully examined in all leadership learning experiences for both domestic and international

students. If leadership educators commit to a *critical perspective* approach, all students are much more likely to be prepared for the international dynamics all encounter.

In addition to promoting international students' leadership development, leadership programming can also provide opportunities for interactions between international and domestic students (Bletscher, Alharbi, & Kellerman, 2017). Structured, guided programming can help students overcome the barriers that often prevent them from interacting across cultures—especially issues of language, culture, and finding common interests (Glass et al., 2015; Lehto et al., 2014). Drawing from Allport's intergroup contact theory, and in particular the conditions necessary for positive intergroup contact, can help educators structure meaningful opportunities for engagement both in and out of the classroom (cited in Pettigrew, 1998). Educators should pay attention to creating situations in which domestic and international students have equal group status, can cooperate to work toward common goals, and have opportunities to develop meaningful friendships.

Although it is important to create these opportunities for international and domestic students to interact, it is also important to recognize that there are benefits for international students in interacting with others from their home countries specifically, or other international students in general. As Glass (2012) found, attending "events or activities sponsored by groups reflecting your own cultural heritage" was significantly and positively related to international students' perceptions of the campus climate at their institutions (p. 240). Fostering more cross-cultural interactions should not come at the expense of international students' ability to find a sense of belonging with other international students who share their experiences.

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