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Using Post-Study-Abroad Experiences to Enhance International Study

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INTRODUCTION

Everyone likes to get a joke. Those who catch the humor feel included among the others who find it funny. Conversely, those who fail to catch the punchline can feel excluded, leading to frustration, resentment, or even anger toward those who got it. Like a well-timed joke, many study abroad experiences offer opportunities for all people at a university to get it: a broadened global perspective gleaned from interpersonal engagement with cultural others in an international setting. Unfortunately, and far too often, the campus majority who do not have this firsthand travel experience remain disengaged and might feel excluded. We contend, though, that participants are not the only people to benefit from international study; veterans of study abroad, as they share their experiences through multiple channels with others, enhance the campus and community in new and transformative ways.

Student interest in international study is growing among both students coming to the U.S. and U.S. students studying in other countries. *Brain Track*, a popular site assisting international students coming to the United States (US), reports data from the Institute of International Education (IIE) indicating “the number of international students in the US reached an all-time high at over 600,000. Additionally, annual inquiries from prospective international students sent to the US Department of State have recently reached 25 million” (2011). The *Christian Science Monitor* published results from a 2010 report by the IIE documenting 270,604 American students studying abroad in the 2009–2010 academic year, a rise of nearly four percent over the previous year. “This figure has more than tripled in the past two decades, with the number of students studying abroad increasing every year” (Mach).

Despite increased participation, the actual number of students who experience study abroad remains a small fraction of the whole campus population. Scholars acclaim multiple values derived from international education (e.g., Haynes; Braid and Palma de Schrynemakers; Karsan; Otero; Hoffa; Lewin), but frequently the value of these opportunities remains sequestered. The broader campus community is not afforded the chance to “get it,” and thus study abroad

remains unfamiliar or elusive to many within campus communities. Akin to those on the outside of a joke, uninformed individuals can harbor negativity toward study-abroad opportunities and outcomes.

THE FOUR Es: PERCEPTIONS AGAINST INTERNATIONAL STUDY

Detractors of international study contend that educational practices involving study abroad can be described in the following negative ways:

1. **Elitist** because they are highly selective and not typically available to the general campus population, with only a small percentage of the campus community participating.
2. **Extravagant** because the low number of students directly served and the high costs for the participants do not justify the institutional support or expenditures.
3. **Elementary** because of a lack in academic rigor, with international programs resembling holidays more than activities meriting academic credit.
4. **Ephemeral** because participation can produce an interruption of an individual's progress toward a completed degree, with international study becoming tangential and distracting students from their commitment to academic study.

The cry of elitism often comes from those who consider international experiences as activities which promote privilege. Indeed, many early university study-abroad programs were offered by “privileged liberal arts colleges with a tradition of sending students on *the Grand European Tour*” (DeWinter 56). While many such programs encouraged language acquisition, they involved little direct engagement with the culture and people of the host country. This lack of connectivity can seem elitist, particularly when American students pass judgments through the eyes of class privilege in developing countries. One student, recognizing this elitist view, reflected, “We walk into their country [South Africa] and see need everywhere, and pain, and struggle. South Africans look at their country and see a miracle” (Dean and Jendzurski).

The charge of elitism is exacerbated by the financial commitment students must shoulder to participate, a cost some maintain as extravagant. Students can expect an outlay of several thousand dollars beyond tuition for even short programs. To illustrate, one institution offered thirty-one January term international study programs ranging from \$5,540 to \$10,235, but these prices did not cover all travel or room and board expenses (Program Cost Chart). Furthermore, universities experience substantial administrative costs for such programs, especially those funding faculty.

Negativity toward international study, articulated especially in climates of economic uncertainty, creates a tumultuous context in which honors directors and other advocates of international study must justify program existence.

Green notes that the current economic recession in the United States, coupled with a near 9% unemployment rate in 2012, produced a significant impact on the economic priorities of colleges and universities. Pressures remain high to trim costs and justify expenses. To that end, institutions carefully watch their revenue dollars ebb and flow in programs such as international study (Green 12). Losses become particularly hard to justify when the perception exists that international experiences are extravagant and serve only a small minority of students and faculty.

The third concern, the perceived elementary nature of study abroad, intensifies when short-term cultural immersions substitute for more traditional models of semester- or year-long study abroad options; critics tend to associate trip duration with quality outcomes. Chieffo criticizes institutions that seek “to increase study abroad opportunities for their students (and enrollment numbers for their national rankings) with little oversight or attention to quality” (367). The image of students on a holiday still lingers as current skeptics of international study express concern about proliferation of what Woolf calls “educational tourism” (503). Chieffo asks, “How much meaningful academic and cultural learning can take place in a four-week period as students surf and snorkel their way in groups along Australia’s Gold Coast, listening to their American professor lecture on a bus, and stopping to pet kangaroos at the next wildlife refuge?” (367). Woolf also cautions, “It behooves us to ask awkward questions about content and purpose. In many cases, content will be of marginal validity, and the purpose may well have more to do with finance and publicity than with learning and teaching” (503). Many honors directors advocating international study (e.g., Karsan; Montgomery; Otero) call for academic standards supported by Chieffo when she claims, “Academic rigor must be the guiding principle in the development of all programs, regardless of their location or structure” (378).

Finally, some in academia overtly dismiss time spent internationally as ephemeral to the serious pursuit of a student’s academic major. Without careful planning, a semester abroad could require students to complete an extra semester, or more, on campus. Evidence shows particularly low participation in international study from science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) majors, for whom disruption of highly sequenced and nontransferable courses can delay graduation (Haynes 19). Accusations are also levied against programs operating during spring breaks that distract attention before and cause exhaustion after travel, negatively affecting academic performance. Braskamp documents instances of intense negativity toward international study when professors have overtly discouraged students from “disrupting their education on campus” (2).

The likelihood that the travel component of international study involves only a small portion of the student population provides a creative challenge for proponents of global education. An important strategy available to honors directors championing international study involves initiating re-entry programming and institutionalizing it in both curricular and co-curricular ways.

Post-travel engagement opportunities ensure that members of the campus community, beyond those who travel, gain from the investments that honors programs and their institutions make in international study. An antidote to perceptions that study abroad is elitist, extravagant, elementary, and ephemeral is making skeptics and detractors more aware of the exceptional educational value international study provides. Post-travel programming affords student and faculty participants in study abroad multiple venues to return expenditures invested in them to the wider campus community. As they share post-travel experiences with others, honors students and faculty become ambassadors for international education, providing administrators with evidence of quality outcomes that justify institutional investments of time as well as financial resources. Furthermore, creating greater prominence through course development and co-curricular activities helps sustain international programming as part of the institutional fabric, diminishing claims that international study is elementary and ephemeral.

Sadly, many proponents of global education fall short in capitalizing on the opportunity to maximize post-travel programs. A lack of innovative and sustainable mechanisms for disseminating knowledge and skills gained from international study remains an unmet challenge. Without post-travel engagement, the broader campus community remains excluded from the vast educational value international study affords; they do not “get it.”

THE UNMET CHALLENGE: WEAK ADVOCACY FOR POST-INTERNATIONAL STUDY

Advocacy for post-international study is often thwarted by time-intensive logistical details and a cultural mindset that the “abroad” portion of international study represents its conclusion. Proponents must prepare themselves to deal with these two realities.

One significant logistical problem is that international travel frequently happens at the end of terms and during summers. By the time students and faculty return to campus for the subsequent semester, their experiences are old news. Others who travel over mid-term breaks suffer an abrupt re-entry to campus responsibilities, including strenuous academic and co-curricular demands, that impede them from educating others and sharing stories. Still other participants engage in international programs as senior reward trips and, because they have graduated, do not return to campus when the international portion of the program concludes.

Beyond inherent logistical challenges loom attitudinal barriers that thwart post-travel experiences. Too many people consider a study-abroad program completed as soon as the plane lands on American soil. For all the diligent work done in preparing students for international study, program directors do a great disservice to the program, students, professors, and institutions when they

neglect opportunities for students and faculty to share lessons learned abroad within the home campus community.

Hovey advocates persistence in seeking avenues for information dissemination and sees students and professors as untapped resources:

Students return from abroad filled with energy and excitement, often transformed by their experiences, but struggle to find opportunities and outlets for channeling their newfound energies. We need to harness and direct this energy toward lifelong learning, growth, and engagement in communities back home. There has been a tremendous amount of chatter within higher education around civic engagement and undergraduate education. Harnessed correctly, study abroad may be as close to a solution as we will find. (38)

When individuals directing international programs recognize that post-travel education is just as valuable as pre-travel preparation, they can reap the benefits of greater community support for international study. Such sharing allows the transformational moments of a relative few to permeate the larger campus body. As more students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community members gain opportunities for secondhand exposure to global education, the investment of time and financial resources in a few is extended to many. As honors directors and leaders of student organizations seek platforms for publicizing international study, more members of the campus community begin to understand the inherent value of international study opportunities.

RETURNING THE INVESTMENT: CAMPUS GLOBALIZATION THROUGH INTERNATIONAL STUDY

In summer 2001, West Chester University began what would become over a decade-long partnership of research-based service learning in South Africa. Students register for a spring-semester course preparing them for historical, social, cultural, and political awareness as well as skills in ethnographic research. Following the course, students experience a two-week immersion in South Africa built around a student-faculty research project consisting of a community needs assessment conducted on behalf of local leaders within a South African township region (typically Gugulethu or Khayelitsha). Students also help prepare the soup that will feed nearly 6,000 children in one day, engage with children at two HIV/AIDS children's hospices, and directly interact with social activists and jurists who played central roles in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the transition from apartheid to democracy.

Details of this model, especially relating to preparation and student learning outcomes measured between 2001 and 2011, are documented elsewhere (Dean and Jendzurski). The cumulative participation, as of our most recent

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delegation in May 2012, totals over one hundred honors students and seventeen honors faculty. The participants represent thirty-four academic departments and reflect the full academic breadth of our campus community, which includes the Colleges of Arts & Sciences, Business, Education, Health Science, and Vocal & Performing Arts. The number of students and faculty travelers represents approximately 20% of the honors college student population and 31% of the faculty who teach in our program. Within a student body of some 15,000 undergraduate students, our partnership with South Africa has garnered campus-wide recognition and exists as a hallmark of our honors college. We attained this recognition through intentional and serendipitous efforts in developing curricular and co-curricular opportunities where student and faculty participants share learned lessons with the broader community.

The heterogeneous mixture of first-year, sophomore, junior, and senior students included in each delegation contributes to our international program's success. Most recently, in spring 2012, thirty-two honors students and four honors faculty participated in a semester-long honors seminar leading into the international immersion portion of the program. The majority (55.5%) represented first- or second-year students while only 12.4% of first-time participants were graduating seniors. These ratios remain consistent with totals from the previous years, reflecting our motivation to encourage participation from students early in their academic careers rather than promoting a senior reward trip model. Of the 102 students who traveled as part of at least one delegation (of five) since 2004, only sixteen were graduating seniors. Participating early in international study affords students time for applying learned skills to community involvement back home and exploring possibilities for further international study programs during their undergraduate careers.

At minimum, 84% of participants in our program return to campus in the fall term following their international experience. This consistently high percentage significantly contributes to program sustainability. Indeed, our best recruitment tool for international study comes from students' sharing the personal value of their experiences with peers and colleagues. Moreover, students who return the semester following international study demonstrate increased motivation to seek leadership and service roles within both honors and campus initiatives (Dean and Jendzurski). Such positions provide platforms of greater visibility for students to advocate the values of sustained international study.

POST-TRAVEL INVESTMENT

We concur with Haynes when she notes the importance of building time for critical reflection into international study so that students have opportunities to debrief and reflect on both academic and nonacademic experiences while abroad (21). The direct flight from Johannesburg International to Kennedy International lasts about seventeen hours and provides an ideal time for reflection. As students board the flight, the faculty members give students three questions to consider:

1. What lesson of leadership most inspired you?
2. What memory will you tell others when they ask about this trip?
3. With South Africa behind you, what commitment will you make during the summer to employ some of the lessons learned through service that you will report back to the group in the fall?

Historically, we arrive back on our campus and meet with the students for a final three-hour group debriefing over lunch. We use that time to have delegates share their thoughts to the three prompts we posed for their consideration during the flight. Parents are alerted about this meeting well in advance and realize they will not interact with their daughters and sons until the program concludes. This time commitment is sacrosanct as it provides critical closure to the shared experience while all delegates are available for participation.

While all three questions merit attention, having students address the “What memory you will share?” inquiry proves especially valuable. The most prevalent questions students face from family and friends are “Well, how was it?” and “Did you have a nice time?” Riveting images of human suffering often challenge students to find the appropriate word or phrase to capture the moment. Our students need a safe place to put into words what they have witnessed. Providing participants an opportunity to fully articulate a concrete image in the company of others who have shared these experiences eases the transition back to American society.

Almost to a person, the central memories students and faculty recount are not the beauty of the Cape of Good Hope, the majesty of a herd of elephants, or the distinctiveness of the food and cultural artifacts; most often they share personal conversations and specific relationships forged with South Africans: holding a child with HIV/AIDS who did not want to let go; seeing a smile of appreciation for receiving a cup of soup; hearing the voice of a high school girl who dreams of being a teacher and helping others to learn. These vivid recollections motivate students and faculty to continue caring and seeking opportunities to make a positive difference in the community they now see as much larger than just their hometown (Dean and Jendzurski). In short, students and faculty are transformed from participant observers to ambassadors for global education. Through sharing insights about the personal relationships formed, students also dispel the charge of elitism and replace it with the realities of empathy and compassion.

INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL TRANSFORMATIONS ON CAMPUS

Our flight home represents a new beginning, not an end. Before 2001, our university's curriculum did not include South Africa at all, nor were there any co-curricular links to South Africa in student service projects or community outreach. In that year, we received a one-time grant from the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) to take twenty-eight students from the

fourteen institutions within the system to South Africa for two weeks following an intensive two-week training course on campus. What we all thought would be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for our two students and six faculty members has matured into a lasting icon of our educational program, enriching the lives of students and other members of the campus community who may never step onto South African soil. The transformational enhancements are categorized as either curricular or co-curricular offerings.

TRANSFORMATIONS OF CAMPUS CURRICULUM FROM STUDY ABROAD

In her May 2012 keynote address for *Knowledge Crossing Borders: International Conference on Higher Education*, Muriel Howard, president of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, proclaimed the need for major changes in curriculum that would produce global literacy for all students. Curricular changes institutionalize valued concepts; the addition of new courses and revision of old ones weave threads into the tapestry of the institution. Our international programs in South Africa function as an incubator for course offerings that help move our institution toward meeting Howard's charge to provide "global education to a broadening audience."

Our partnership with South Africa has resulted in the regular offering of three new courses. In fall 2001, we offered a special topics course—Personal Leadership Development: Lessons from South Africa (HON 352)—designed to share the experiences of our student and faculty leadership team in South Africa the previous spring. The course provided a vehicle for disseminating the lessons learned to a wider audience who did not have the firsthand experience. The class filled within twenty-four hours of its posting. While initially envisioned as a one-time offering, the popularity of the class warranted listing the course again in fall 2002. Enrollment momentum remains so great that we continue offering the class every fall term; to date, it has served nearly 550 students (nearly 90% of the students in honors over the past decade).

Students enrolled in HON 352, most of whom have just arrived on campus, experience the course as an overview of the ways scholars from multiple disciplines study leadership. Numerous examples from our South Africa interactions serve as illustrations for each new theoretical perspective addressed. Program alumni, who share their stories peer-to-peer, coupled with presentations by faculty representing diverse academic perspectives, expose enrolled students to global awareness and generate motivation for further investigation. As part of the course, students complete two community-service projects and write a short report for each activity that addresses (a) what opportunity existed for enhancement; (b) how their presence mattered in the project; (c) how the service they provided could be sustained; and (d) how the service relates to issues faced by South Africans. Once more, the emphasis on service and sharing personal insights helps dampen charges of elitism.

In 2006, we took video recording equipment with us to South Africa to document our interviews for the research project, our conversations with agents for social change, and some of the historical, cultural, and environmental locations we visited. The following spring, we developed the course Video Production for Social Justice (HON 451), in which students who did not participate in the international delegation could use students' footage to produce mini-documentaries. The sustained popularity of the course justifies regular offering in the spring semester following an international study project. During the last week of the term, we reserve a campus theatre, outfitted with a projection system, large screen, and surround-sound, to premier the documentaries to the greater campus community. We also share the projects with appropriate international hosts. H.E.L.P. Ministries, which runs a large community-based hunger-relief program targeting elementary schools, currently features two of our student-produced videos on its website (Begbie).

Due to the changing nature of our collaborative research, each trip to South Africa necessitates the development of a new course to prepare students for their international experience. Thus, our links with South Africa have generated six different pedagogical designs involving cross-disciplinary and international cooperation. The two-course sequence (HON 352/451), with its research project linked to international service, addresses the charge that international study is ephemeral since the courses are part of a curriculum leading to certification in honors; the sequence also addresses the charge of "elementary" since the courses have measurable rigor and produce assessable products.

In addition to course development, the South Africa program has contributed to effective teaching. Since 2001, seventeen professors from seven academic disciplines have traveled with the students, serving as mentors for the research portion of the project and assisting with the regular debriefing sessions held after each day in the host country. Professors incorporate stories from their experience into a wide array of classes. For example, Peter Loedel, a professor of political science who traveled as a delegate in 2006, subsequently updated and revised a course on African politics that had not been offered in over twenty years, adding a diversity component and updating material related to the HIV/AIDs epidemic in Africa in general and South Africa in particular. Loedel incorporated material from the Gugulethu and Khayelitsha research projects and interviews of some of the social activists and members of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission we met in South Africa. His class now runs annually and consistently fills enrollment to capacity.

Other examples of course redesign based on our study abroad include incorporating speeches by Nelson Mandela in a course on public speaking, using South African case studies during the apartheid struggle in a communications course on social movements, and including readings by Desmond Tutu in a social work course on race relations. Additionally, students from the thirty-four different majors who have participated over the years have shared their experiences with peers and faculty within their major programs, generating new awareness of the the roles that they can assume as global citizens.

TRANSFORMATIONS OF CO-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES FROM STUDY ABROAD

Seasoned educators recognize that valuable lessons occur not only inside but outside the traditional classroom, especially when overt links exist between curricular and co-curricular activities. While extracurricular activities are independent of any classroom material, “co-curricular” suggests an intentional partnership between learning and activities both in and out of the classroom. Co-curricular events contain an overt educational mission and a sense of accountability for outcomes generated and resources invested. Because co-curricular learning goes beyond the traditional classroom and generally involves the application of theory, students internalize the classroom knowledge. Also, co-curricular activities often create opportunities for civic engagement and for sharing information within the larger community. Dispelling the negative images of elitism and elementary education, students publicly demonstrate intellectual accomplishment through applying theory to practice and practicing community engagement.

Our study-abroad program fosters co-curricular enhancements on our campus in three areas: special events, international festivals, and guest speakers. These events provide global education for thousands of people, both on our campus and in the larger community, who have little if any knowledge of South Africa.

A signature outgrowth of our international study program is “Aid to South Africa” (A.S.A.). Now in its eighth year, this annual student-run event, inaugurated in 2006 by two students who had traveled to South Africa, raises funds and educational awareness for South African children infected with HIV/AIDS. Motivated by a desire to raise both community consciousness and financial support for care providers they worked with, the two honors students recruited campus support for hosting the event and kept accurate organizational records that could be passed along to the next generation of leaders who would plan and produce the event.

In subsequent years, new student leaders within the honors college, motivated by the stories and accounts of peers who experienced South Africa firsthand, have spent a full year organizing, promoting, and executing the event. Through a well-crafted committee structure, students draw leadership lessons from their coursework and apply these insights to accomplish the tasks needed for hosting this major event. The day-long program, held on a weekend in April, features multiple educational and cultural displays of South African life such as music, entertainment, food, and soccer, and it provides opportunities for alumni of our study-abroad program to share their stories.

Over 80% of the proceeds go directly to three service partners: H.E.L.P. Ministries Soup Kitchen and two HIV/AIDS orphanages and hospices (Nkosi’s Haven and Sparrow Village). Since 2006, A.S.A. has generated over \$48,000 in donated funds, involved over five hundred honors students in planning and

executing the program, and has drawn hundreds of community members to campus. In 2011, the Division of Student Affairs named A.S.A. the Outstanding Student Service Program of the Year. A.S.A. has become so institutionalized on campus that our student government leadership points to it as a prime example of student commitment to international engagement.

A second co-curricular outreach comes through participation of students and faculty in our university's "International Festival Week," held each fall. The campus organizes library displays of cultural artifacts and sponsors educational sessions where students and faculty share lessons learned and best practices gained from their international experiences. Several of our student and faculty delegates engage in this event, providing one more venue to advocate greater global awareness.

A final co-curricular outgrowth is bringing noted authors, scholars, and social activists to campus. Authors of two prize-winning books—texts assigned as required reading for HON 352 and for student delegates preparing for travel to South Africa—honored us by speaking to our classes and larger community audiences. Author of *Kaffir Boy*, Mark Mathabane shared an autobiographical account of his childhood in Alexandria Township during the horrific oppression of apartheid. Jim Wooten, who wrote *We are All the Same*, recounted the courageous story of a little boy, Nkosi Johnson, afflicted by HIV/AIDS who became a global spokesperson for the ravenous disease. Wooten also chronicled the social activism of Nkosi's adoptive mother, Gail Johnson, who continues pioneering work on behalf of dying mothers and their sick children.

Several South African scholars and social activists with whom we met over the past decade have included our university as a stop during their travels in the United States. Piet Meiring, professor of theology at the University of Pretoria and one of the initial jurists on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, shared accounts of those proceedings. Cecil Begbie, who runs H.E.L.P. ministries, has visited our campus four times since 2004 and shared his personal story of courage against police brutality during the apartheid years and his organizational gifts that allow him to feed 6,000 people daily. Gail Johnson, Director of the HIV/AIDS hospice Nkosi's Haven and a pioneer in breaking the social norms of separating sick mothers from their children, met in fall 2012 with students and community members in an auditorium packed with over three hundred students and community members. We have also had interaction with Godfrey Mulaudzi, first secretary of the South African Embassy in Washington, and Leon Naidoo, Counsel for the South African Consulate in New York. These individuals and others reinforce the power of global community and the value we all gain through dialogue with one another.

CONCLUSION

During a campus debriefing session following one of the research projects, an honors student delegate affirmed that our program "did a good job preparing me for what I saw of South Africa from the windows of the bus, but nothing

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short of being there, prepared me for meeting people at eye level. I now *get it*, why we went to South Africa and how that memory will motivate my service in my home community” (Dean and Jendzurski). International education, built on a solid academic foundation and combining intense immersion, a service-learning-based research project, and opportunities for interpersonal engagement, can produce transformational moments for honors students and faculty. As institutions question the value of such investment, honors directors can help bolster the value of global education by showcasing such experiences. Particularly in times of economic uncertainty, honors delegates studying abroad need to support international education by sharing their experiences with the broader campus community. The curricular and co-curricular offerings of post-international study might serve as a model for other honors programs with goals of establishing such opportunities, justifying the value of global education, and spreading international awareness campus-wide. Just as those amused by a good joke enjoy sharing it with friends, those who gain an appreciation for international study will enthusiastically pass along to others accounts gleaned through interaction with firsthand participants.

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