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Overcoming the Study Abroad Hype

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Within recent years, a remarkable groundswell of support for study abroad has emerged. In 2001, the American Council on Education reported that 75% of the public believe that study abroad should be included in a student's college education (Hayward & Siaya, 21–25). Three years later, the NASULGC (National Association for State Universities and Land Grant Colleges) Task Force issued *A Call to Leadership* urging university presidents to focus on international education as a means of enriching student learning and achievement, and the United States Senate passed Resolution 308 declaring 2006 as the Year of Study Abroad. Even more recently, the Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act, which is designed to leverage governmental resources to expand the number of students studying abroad, received unanimous approval by the House of Representatives and will be heading to the Senate soon.

In many ways, this broad-based support is understandable. American students' understanding of the world is remarkably shallow. As the U.S. Senate noted in its 2006 resolution, "87% of students in the United States between the ages of 18 and 24 cannot locate Iraq on a world map, 83% cannot find Afghanistan, 58% cannot find Japan, and 11% cannot even find the United States" (Vistawide). The Lincoln Commission, which was established by Congress in 2004, also explained, "What nations do not know exacts a heavy toll. The stakes involved in study abroad are that simple, that straightforward, and that important" (3).

As the Lincoln Commission intimates, study abroad offers many benefits, including improving Americans' global understanding. The GLOSSARI project, a ten-year effort to document academic outcomes of study abroad across the entire University System of Georgia, found that students who studied abroad had a higher four-year graduation rate, a higher mean cumulative GPA, and a greater functional knowledge of cultural practices, than non-studying abroad students (Redden). A 2009 survey of 6,391 study abroad participants revealed that study abroad impacted their career paths and capacity for global engagement (e.g., civic engagement, knowledge production, philanthropy, social entrepreneurship, and volunteerism) (Paige et al.). Other

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studies have reported additional positive outcomes, including a deeper understanding of global issues (Carlson et al.; Carsello and Creaser; Douglas and Jones-Rikkens); more favorable attitudes toward other cultures (Kitsantas); stronger intercultural communication skills (Anderson et al.; Williams); improved self-image (Cushner and Mahon); and better foreign language skills (Freed).

Influenced by these findings, numerous colleges and universities have begun to incorporate study abroad into their strategic planning, curricular requirements, and marketing processes (Bollag; Fischer). The study abroad contagion recently surfaced at my own institution. Four years ago, the president and provost set the lofty goal that at least 50% of our 14,000 students would study abroad at some point during their undergraduate education. To better ensure the success of this goal, the provost and director of international education personally paid a visit to each department across campus issuing strong inducements to incorporate study abroad experiences into its curriculum. At the same time, a new university-wide funding model was instituted requiring that any new international program developed by faculty operate at a profit.

Not surprisingly, within weeks I began receiving numerous urgent email requests from faculty members asking me to advertise their study abroad programs to honors students. Glitzy colored posters began appearing all over campus, some of them promising four-star-hotel-type amenities and long weekends or mid-term breaks to accommodate additional tourist-type travel.

As honors director, I had decidedly mixed feelings about the new aggressive study abroad strategic goal and the resulting marketing efforts. On the one hand, I understood the need for the increased entrepreneurial efforts of my colleagues (particularly given the new funding model) and was in some ways grateful. I was fully aware from the remarks made by many prospective students and family members that some of our competitor honors programs offer and frequently fund luxury international-travel opportunities. Even more importantly, I have witnessed the cognitive, personal, and social maturation that can occur when honors students engage in rigorous and transformative international learning experiences.

On the other hand, I have observed other students return from their study abroad programs with less than stellar results. In fact, some have returned uttering remarks eerily similar to those Ben Feinberg heard when interviewing one of his students who had spent ten weeks in Zimbabwe:

When asked what he had learned from his African experience, Peter used the first-person pronoun seven times . . . : 'I learned that I'm a risk taker, um, that I don't put up with people's bull, uh, what else? That I can do anything that I put my mind to.'

. . . Peter didn't mention that Zimbabweans live in an impoverished dictatorship where 25 percent of the population is HIV positive, and thus they can't do anything that they put their minds to . . . Instead, like so many other traveling young people, he claimed to have learned about himself, and talked about group dynamics; students' transgressive behavior, like drinking too much; and bungee jumping at Victoria Falls.

Jessup-Anger has pointed out that, although evidence exists that students can gain cross-cultural understanding through study abroad, many programs fail to provide students with tools for intercultural understanding. She notes that some programs assume that "the immersion experience alone will be sufficient for students to learn about other cultures. This approach fails to acknowledge that students bring their own socially constructed identities and cultural assumptions to a host country. . . . These identities and assumptions influence and in some cases may distort the ways in which students approach, endure and reflect on their experiences" (360).

These conflicting observations and perspectives about the effects of study abroad gave me pause. Although plenty of evidence for the beneficial effects of study abroad exists, other studies show that study abroad may not fully live up to the considerable hype it has received in recent years. The percentage of U.S. students studying abroad has been relatively small (particularly in relation to students from other highly industrialized countries) and has remained relatively steady (Lewin, 8; Salisbury et al.). In 2005, for example, U.S. students constituted only 1.3% of the total enrollment of all students studying abroad (Institute of International Education 2006). Also notable is the lack of diversity among students who study abroad; most are white women who major in social sciences, hail from affluent families, and travel to English-speaking countries (Institute of International Education 2009). Even though pre-professional students and students majoring in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and math) enter college with the same level of desire to study abroad, they are far less likely to do so (Salisbury et al., 138). Troublingly, Pedersen et al. found that "heavier drinking American college students may self-select into study abroad programs with specific intentions to use alcohol in the foreign environment" (844). Over half of students studying abroad participate in short-term (less than eight weeks) programs led in English by an American faculty member rather than enrolling in a longer-term program for one or more semesters (Institute of International Education 2009). Perhaps more surprisingly, even when students participate in home-stays (which is often seen as the litmus test of a high-quality study abroad program), students may have little meaningful interaction with their host family members. Frank found that home-stay students often spend time

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at home alone, engage in redundant and simple conversations, or simply sit with the family members around the television. One study found that, although study abroad enhances students' ability to speak orally in a foreign language, students still speak more English than another language while studying abroad (Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey).

Although these findings are dismaying, they do not prompt me to reject the promise of study abroad. They do, however, propel me to ponder ways that honors programs and colleges can foster the best learning that study abroad programs can offer. Toward that end, I have generated a set of key indicators with guiding questions that I plan and encourage others to consider:

LEARNING OUTCOMES OR GOALS

What are the learning goals or outcomes of each study abroad program? Are they aligned with the mission and goals of the honors program or college? What expectations for learning have been articulated for students who study abroad? How are those learning and other behavioral expectations communicated to students and to the leadership involved in the study abroad program? How does one know if these expectations are met? Have some ways of measuring the outcomes or benefits of study abroad been put in place?

DIVERSITY OF PROGRAMS

Does the honors program or college offer a range of different programs of varying length, location, and type? In addition to sponsored programs (led and operated by faculty from the home institution and serving only students from the home institution), are other program types available such as co-sponsored programs (led and operated by faculty of another U.S. university and serving students from a variety of U.S. institutions) or exchange programs (led and operated by faculty from the foreign host university with students enrolling in the foreign institution)? Are there opportunities for students to study in English-speaking as well as non-English speaking countries? Are there opportunities for students to study abroad for short and longer durations? Because some students, for a variety of personal and financial reasons, may not be able to study abroad, are domestic opportunities available that promote intercultural understanding? Sobania and Braskamp have noted the benefits of "study away" opportunities where students are immersed in diverse cultures within a local or regional community.

ACCESSIBILITY

Are quality programs available and accessible to all honors students, including students from STEM disciplines and pre-professional fields? Are

men as well as women encouraged to participate? African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans too infrequently study abroad because of not only “significant expense” but also “cultural fears, family anxieties, and . . . the need for greater pastoral care in preparing students for the experience” (Lewin, 10). Salisbury et al. have found that the “impact of social and cultural capital accumulation before college is influential for all students—no matter their socio-economic status” (137), social and cultural capital being one’s cultural knowledge, educational credentials, language skills, access to resources, and support. Students who come with low levels of pre-college capital are much less likely to study abroad even when they have full financial assistance. Are structures in place to provide the financial assistance as well as the other forms of support needed to make studying abroad truly accessible?

CURRICULUM INTEGRATION

Students can make much more of their experience if they have been introduced to global and cultural issues prior to the study abroad experience and if they can deepen the knowledge gained from the study abroad experience with more advanced internationally-focused courses and engagement opportunities. Lewin argues that curriculum integration does not necessarily need to come in the form of relatively costly pre- or post-departure courses tied explicitly to individual study abroad programs. Instead, he advocates for the “existence and expansion of general coursework that exposes students to global systems, area studies, and world language training” (10). Encouraging faculty to infuse international examples and issues into their honors courses can also aid students in capitalizing on their study abroad experience.

MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT

Intercultural understanding, including second-language acquisition, can be heightened when students meaningfully engage with members of the host country and particularly when the engagement is sustained over time. Rather than resembling a European grand tour, do the study abroad programs feature research opportunities, internships, community service projects, coursework with host-country students, or other intensive opportunities for engagement with members of the host country?

CRITICAL REFLECTION

When engaged in experiential learning, students learn more deeply by coupling concrete experiences with reflective thought (Kolb). Do students have opportunities to reflect on their academic and non-academic experiences while abroad? Eyster, Giles, & Schmeides have identified four critical factors

that should be promoted in reflection: (1) continuity (students are encouraged to reflect as an ongoing part of the study abroad experience); (2) connection (students are asked to connect the study abroad experience to course-based learning); (3) challenge (students are prompted to think in a new or more critical way); and (4) contextualization (students are asked to consider contextual factors related to their learning).

CONCLUSION

The list of six ingredients for quality study abroad programs that I have described here is meant to be suggestive rather than prescriptive or exhaustive. My goal for developing this list is simple. As the chorus of calls for study abroad and the numbers of students studying abroad continue to surge, honors educators need to remain vigilant that students make the most of their international learning experiences so that they are prepared to meet the challenges of globalization. Rather than unquestioningly accepting the hype of study abroad, we must critically analyze the value of study abroad and put in place support mechanisms to promote high-quality transformative learning.

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