

## Beyond Anecdote: Education Abroad Comes of Age

**A**NYONE WHO HAS HAD THE EXPERIENCE OF STUDYING ABROAD, or has supervised someone who has, knows that it is often a pivotal event in a student's college experience. Students return from education abroad to their campuses with a predictable range of almost universally positive responses to the experience. But until recently it has been difficult for enthusiasts of study abroad to provide anything other than anecdotal accounts to back up their enthusiasm. In the past, program directors approaching administrators for support have not had much in the way of evidence to first of all prove the assertion that an experience abroad can be an invaluable part of a student's education and then to show exactly how these experiences are valuable and which kinds of programs are most effective.

However, a recent explosion of research efforts in the field is beginning to change that. In the past 10 years, education abroad professionals, other faculty, and graduate students have accelerated a process that actually began in the 1920s and picked up momentum in the 1950s and 1960s, of gathering the hard data needed to prove what we all know—that study abroad is, for many students, a “life-changing” experience.

### **Why the Explosion of Research?**

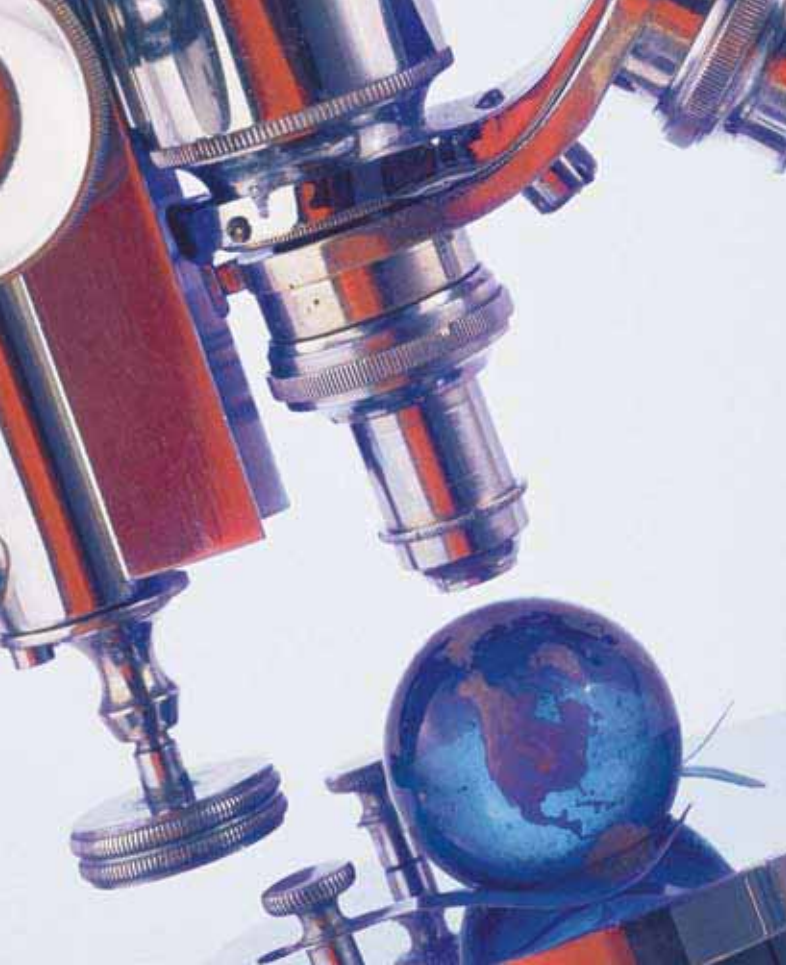
Why have the past 10 years shown a proliferation of studies researching various issues connected with education abroad? “In the post-9/11 era there is greater interest in understanding the world and how people in different societies and cultures view the United States, as well as what their values and motivations are,” says William Brustein, director of the University Center for International Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. “The universities have placed international education at the forefront of their agendas, so I think it's been furthered by that as well. But also some of it's coming from funding agencies asking whether what we claim we're doing in terms of international education, we're really achieving.”

Carl Herrin, whose organization, Herrin Associates, lobbies Congress on behalf of his clients in in-

ternational education, knows how important it is to have hard data to back up claims about the benefits of education abroad. “At this moment in time, by virtue of events in the past four or five years, there's an intuitive understanding among policymakers that study abroad needs to be a part of getting Americans to a safer place,” he says. But they still want to see results before apportioning money to it. “If you give me a study that tells me about the impact of study abroad, or how it works, or what makes it most effective, that informs in very useful ways the arguments that one makes to policymakers about how programs ought to be structured, whether or not they ought to be funded, if so at what level, and why they're ultimately valuable to the national interest.”

### **What Is the New Research Showing?**

“A lot of previous study focused on language learning and basic outcomes, and that's still a lot of the institutional research,” says David Comp of the University of Chicago's Office of International Affairs. Comp is in a good position to have a sense of the range of topics addressed in recent studies, having compiled several bibliographies of published research in the field over the past six years. “But,” he adds, “we're starting to see more longitudinal research, to see what kind of



impact study abroad is having on students after graduation in terms of getting a job, and five years out, 10 years out, the impact on their personal and career development.”

Another new area of scrutiny is student populations traditionally underrepresented in education abroad programs. This includes racial and ethnic minorities, but also students from underrepresented disciplines such as science and engineering, from community colleges, working adults, and students with learning disabilities. Some recent studies have attempted to determine what barriers, whether external or self-imposed, are keeping the numbers down in certain demographic groups, despite vigorous efforts to involve a more diverse group of participants. Others have focused on the benefits of various types of programming for specific populations.

For example, two studies published in *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* in 2005 (Shames & Alden, “The Impact of Short-Term Study Abroad on the Identity Development of College Students with Learning Disabilities and/or AD/HD,” and Spero C. Peppas, “Business Study Abroad Tours for Non-Traditional Students: An Outcomes Assessment”) focus on the benefits of short-term education abroad experiences for two very specific student populations. What the research shows in both cases, says Brian Whalen, editor of *Frontiers*, “is that this kind of programming has its place, depending on the context, the population, and the way in which the program is structured... We need to be smart about our analysis of these types of programs.”

Many of the new studies have provided the hard data needed to demonstrate quantitatively the benefits that professionals in the field have intuitively recognized for decades. But the research has

also challenged assumptions held for decades and shown that some of them are not necessarily true.

“When I came into the field, I was surprised at the number of assumptions that are simply seen to be truisms,” says Mary Dwyer, president of the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES). The 50-year longitudinal IES MAP study (“The Benefits of Study Abroad: New Study Confirms Significant Gains,” *Transitions Abroad*, March–April 2004) surveyed more than 3,400 students who had participated in IES programs from 1950–1999 and gathered quantitative data across a large set of measures, including career impact, personal growth, and intercultural development. And while the IES study confirms and provides support for much of the field’s conventional wisdom, there were also some surprising results. “One assumption was that you absolutely had to take all of your courses in the language of the country,” Dwyer says. “This study showed that frankly, in some measures it was better to have been taught in English. Another assumption was that home stays are the only way that students can learn a foreign language; in fact, our study showed that the important element that makes the difference in how advanced you get is whether you live with host country nationals, whether that’s in a dormitory, an apartment building, or in a family home.” The results of the study have helped IES to make decisions about programming that are in the best interests of students. “We now encourage all of our centers overseas to offer our students multiple housing options as long as they’re with host country nationals. For some proportion of students, living with a family is a great option; for others it’s a developmental step backward. The point is, students should have options,” Dwyer concludes.

Another surprise came from a study published in *Frontiers* in 2004 (Trooboff, Cressey & Monty, “Does Study Abroad Grading Motivate Students?”). This CIEE study tested the long-held assumption that counting grades in the home campus grade point average (GPA) motivated students to do well while on study abroad. “The conventional wisdom, and our instinct, has been to count the grades in the GPA, that that’s better because the students will try harder, and so on,” says Whalen. “But this research shows just the opposite.”

### **How Is the Research Being Used to Gain Support for Education Abroad?**

The Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program, a bipartisan group commissioned by Congress in 2004, was charged with developing a program that “assists a diverse group of students and meets the growing need of the United States to become more sensitive to the cultures of other countries.” Over

the past year and a half, the commissioners and staff have reviewed the existing research. “We decided that we needed to make a case for Congress to fund a fellowship program that would vastly expand and enhance study abroad activities, and in essence call upon higher education to create a true culture shift in the way in which American undergraduates perceive time abroad. We looked at the research that was the most compelling, and easiest to grasp for the general consumer,” says Jessica Teague, program manager and assistant to the executive director of the Commission. One of the studies the Commission drew on in writing its report was the *IIE Open Doors 2004: Report on International Educational Exchange*. “That report indicated that a little less than 1 percent of our undergraduate population is currently going abroad... We also looked at the ACE Public Opinion Poll of 2002 and saw that 50 percent of all college-bound high school students express an interest in study abroad, and 75 percent of students think it is important to participate in an internship abroad during their academic career. But you’ve got this disparity between those who want to go and those who actually get to go,” Teague says. The commission’s primary goal, according to Teague, is “to diversify destinations, and to get the student population to more closely mirror the actual entire undergraduate population, as well as to promote diversity in the majors.” The report of the commission, presented to Congress and released to the public in November 2005, calls study abroad an instance in which “private gain is public gain.” “Students change when they study abroad,” says Teague. “If we’re trying to create global citizens, we want to know how study abroad impacts a young person’s world view, personal growth, ability to communicate, and how to be successful in their careers.”

### What Are Some of the Questions in Need of Research?

As researchers design new studies to document various aspects of the education abroad experience, certain areas are in particular need of attention. “We don’t understand why we don’t get certain kinds of students,” Herrin says, adding that while the numbers of students participating in study abroad have skyrocketed in the past 20 years, “the profile of students we’re sending now is still roughly today what it was in the 1970s. It’s still white predominantly, still upper class, still predominantly women, though not as predominantly so. What are the barriers to students’ going? What creates the barriers, and what will effectively overcome them? It’s clear that putting a full scholarship on the table doesn’t get significantly larger numbers of students to go for longer. Why? We’ve got a long way to go in this analysis.”

Brustein is also concerned about educators focusing on and providing a different type of education abroad experience. “When you look at learning abroad, it’s typically a one-country initiative,” he says. “Most people in study abroad will talk about the benefits of immersion, and there are merits to that. But what hasn’t been out there has been enough comparative learning abroad, where you focus on a topic, a global issue, and you study that topic from the perspective

## What Questions Would You Like to See Explored in Future Research Projects?

“I’d like to see more research about the positive effect of study abroad on students’ future academic performance.”

—Margaret Riley, Director and Assistant Dean for Study Abroad, Duke University

“Students coming back and investing their experience in their own campus is a continuing question, I think, for all of us. It would be interesting to see if there are things that could be done that would make it more likely for a student to bring insights gained on study abroad into their classrooms.”

—Nancy Ericksen, Study Abroad Counselor, Trinity University, San Antonio

“Most people in study abroad talk about the benefits of immersion, and there are merits to that. But what hasn’t been out there has been enough comparative learning abroad, where you focus on a global issue and you study that topic from the perspective of a number of different places.”

—William Brustein, Director, University Center for International Studies, University of Pittsburgh

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—Carl Herrin, Herrin Associates

of a number of different places. I think as we build programs from a topical, or multi-country perspective, we are going to find many more students and faculty from the social sciences and professional schools becoming interested, and that in itself may address this issue of underrepresentation of certain disciplines.”

### What Are the Next Steps for Professionals in the Field?

One of the most exciting things about the increase in research efforts in recent years is who is doing some of that research. “We’re getting some very good young professionals coming in with theoretical training, with a very good background,” says Nancy Ericksen, who counsels education abroad students at Trinity University in San Antonio.

“That’s relatively new.” As these young professionals enter the field, they contribute research undertaken during their graduate studies in international education, and this helps to professionalize the field.

Of course, with an exponential increase in the amount of research being done, new problems and challenges arise. “It’s very important for us to move forward together as a field,” Whalen says. “What happens if we don’t is that we start to have too many instruments being used, and we don’t have a coordinated effort that really will focus a research agenda on the issues and on the topics that need to be addressed. When you think about a research agenda, you think about replicating results, replicating research design, using instruments over and over again, and also constructing studies across institutions with control groups. This is why collaboration is so important.” Dwyer agrees, pointing out that while the IES study has been “greatly embraced and appreciated” within the field, it’s important to remember that “although on the one hand the results of this study have a very high significance level, it’s only correlations, it’s not causations. We don’t really know that study abroad has caused these results, we simply know that statistically there are correlations according to what the sample told us. It should be replicated by others.”

It’s also important for both researchers and practitioners to keep up to date on current research efforts. “My concern is that our pro-

fessional colleagues—and I’m as guilty of this as anybody—don’t spend enough time staying current on the literature,” says Herrin. “We’re so busy day to day doing the basic student services and recruitment activities that not enough of us are paying attention to what our colleagues are learning and publishing.” This is of course easier said than done. Comp, who is trying to keep up with the task of cataloguing new studies as they are published, admits that even this is difficult: “There’s almost too much out there now to keep track of.” But it’s important to attempt to do so for many reasons—from using the insights gained from the research to plan better, more effective programs, to making sure that important new questions are being addressed. “We’re not making enough demands of our researching peers,” Herrin says, “Or taking the risks to do research ourselves, to ask the questions we know we have, but forget to ask.”

All in all, however, the outlook is bright. “We’re early in the process,” Herrin says, “But we’re miles ahead of where we were 10 years ago. It’s remarkable.” And Comp points to an increasing number of collaborative efforts that also bode well for the future. “You’re starting to see people and organizations who are competitors working together for the good of the field,” he says. “Things like that are very exciting.” **IE**

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## THEY'RE NAFSA NEW CENTURY CIRCLE MEMBERS



JEANNE-MARIE DUVAL AND SANDY SOOHOO-REFAEI

### JEANNE-MARIE DUVAL

American Councils for International Education:  
ACTR/ACCELS

**NAFSA member since:** 1979

**Most memorable student:** A student from Saudi Arabia, in 1981, my first year of teaching ESL. I arrived in the classroom each day to find that he had written 4-5 lines in Arabic across the top of the blackboard. Turns out they were quotes from the Quran (to purify the classroom) followed by bold slogans - invectives against the injustice of being taught by a woman. I have often wondered if that daily act helped him as much as it taught me

**Favorite NAFSA conference site:** It's a tie: Snowmass ('84) or Vancouver ('87)

**Other than international education, what is your fantasy career:** Fair trader who organizes first 'direct from the artisan' overseas shopping tour for international educators!

**What do you know now that you wish you had known when you were younger:** (1) That I should not have erased those quotes from the blackboard at the start of each class; (2) there is no substitute for a pair of red shoes in your professional wardrobe

**Why did you pledge to the New Century Circle:** Once you grow up, you know what you need to give back

### SANDY SOOHOO-REFAEI

Linfield College

**NAFSA member since:** 1985

**Most memorable student:** I remember so many but there was a student from Brazil who often collected soda cans after class each day to help pay for school. He is now a teacher and an intercultural trainer

**Favorite NAFSA conference site:** Portland, New Orleans, and Washington, DC

**Other than international education, what is your fantasy career:** Artist; gallery, bookshop and bakery owner

**What do you know now that you wish you had known when you were younger:** Be myself, speak my mind, love people and enjoy life more

**Why did you pledge to the New Century Circle:** It is important to me that I pledge a lasting contribution to an organization that has given me so much. I especially want to share with the newer professionals, the same opportunities I have had for professional development, building confidence and expertise, and making lasting friendships with colleagues in the field of international education

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