Creating the Cosmopolitan US Undergraduate: study abroad and an emergent global student profile

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ABSTRACT Undergraduates in the USA bring to college a wide array of backgrounds, resources, and supports that make it more or less likely that they will participate in study abroad during their undergraduate career. This study investigates the experiences of undergraduates who have studied abroad, as well as the elements that facilitate the study abroad experience. The data suggests that students must overcome a number of constraints in order to study abroad. While the paths to study abroad are divergent, a number of common individual and institutional factors affect students’ likelihood for successful participation in a study abroad experience while at college. The data indicate that students must have at their disposal the necessary tools to overcome significant hurdles to study abroad. Institutions of higher education play a crucial role in facilitating not only the study abroad process itself, but also the pre-existing mindset, goals, and sense of agency that students possess in order to take advantage of study abroad opportunities.

This study seeks to investigate the resources, constraints, experiences, and supports for undergraduates who participated in study abroad while attending Porter College, a medium-size four-year college located in an urban center in the north-eastern United States. At many US institutions of higher education, campus internationalization efforts meet the needs of only a small percentage of undergraduate students (Bonfiglio, 1999; Fischer, 2008). By gathering data that help bring shape to an emergent global American student profile, this study provides insights into the factors that contribute to US undergraduates’ ability to study abroad, and more broadly, to engage in international education experiences during their undergraduate years.

The Parochial US Undergraduate

From the fact that in the USA, geography has not traditionally been treated as a separate topic, but rather as a component of broader social studies curricula (Vuich & Stoltman, 1975; Mestenhauser & Ellingboe, 1998), to cultural norms that devalue international experiences (De Wit, 2002), US undergraduates often miss out on the benefits associated with global experiences (Dalton, 1999; Dessoff, 2006; Fischer, 2008). US institutions of higher education offer study abroad programs and short-term exchanges, some mandate foreign language study, and some offer a globalized curriculum (Hser, 2005; McTighe Musil, 2006). At a select few US institutions, participation in international activities is a graduation requirement. However, structured international experiences are frequently not interdisciplinary in nature (Johnston & Edelstein, 1993), and are still considered to be ancillary by faculty (Craufurd & Nacht, 1991) – and even by professional advisement staff – to the majority of students’ educational experiences (Green, 2005; Norfles, 2006). Diversity experiences are critical to student academic success and persistence (Pope et al, 2004; Kuh et al, 2005), and yet these learning opportunities are often not intentionally offered, much less required.
Study abroad is often the centerpiece of internationalization on US campuses. There is an indication that study abroad is gaining more currency at some institutions, even at two-year colleges (Blum, 2006), where the majority of students never consider studying abroad (Raby & Valeau, 2007). The number of American college students going abroad continues to rise. According to the Institute of International Education, ‘the number of students participating in overseas study trips for academic credit has increased nearly 150 percent, to almost 241,800 in the 2006 academic year’ (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2008). The numbers are increasing, though this represents only 2% of the total US student population of 17 million. How can administrators and faculty get more students interested in study abroad? What needs to be understood about students to more fully internationalize our campuses and increase the number of students studying abroad?

US Isolationism in Context

Americans are not globally savvy; only 24% possess a passport (Austen, 2006). America’s geographic isolation does not lend itself to being globally engaged. This state of affairs persists, though not for a lack of trying. In fact, there are some signs that the USA is coming out of this (Heyneman, 2002). Since the 1970s, the international education literature indicates a growing awareness of US integration into a global community over which a sense of control has been lost. There is a realization that access to higher education has become the key ingredient for individuals to compete in the global marketplace, and that somehow the United States is missing the mark when it comes to educating its students (Heyneman, 2002). Ironically, US isolationism is set within a globalized context that reflects opposite trends. These include the expansion of the neo-liberal market model in higher education, heightened competition from global competitors, rapid communication and technological progress, the impact of global conflict on student mobility, decreased public sector support, and a diverging trajectory of costs and revenues (Johnstone, 2004), all of which contribute to a sense that new sources of revenue need to be found to support academic excellence in order to remain globally competitive. This growing international market for education goods and services (Heyneman, 2002) has meant that US institutions of higher education do not have as large a comparative advantage as they once did. They have responded by positioning and branding their institutions through study abroad, by establishing branch campuses, and by providing financial support for faculty exchanges. Internationalization at the institutional level is gaining a degree of traction. However, the potential disconnect that exists between this institutional internationalization and limited global competence on the part of US undergraduates reflects the extent to which campus internationalization may or may not directly affect most undergraduates’ academic experience. The institution itself may benefit from being globally positioned, though the global aptitudes of its domestic undergraduates may not. The deleterious effects of US isolationism on undergraduates’ emergent global profiles persist despite the heightened internationalization of the institution itself.

Campus Internationalization

Based on a 2007 American Council on Education survey of 2476 US institutions of higher education, only 23% of participating US institutions had a separate plan that addresses institution-wide internationalization (Koch, 2008). There is ample coverage in the literature regarding what US institutions are doing to internationalize (Speck & Carmical, 2002; Green, 2005; McCarthy, 2007). They have internationalized their curricula (Schmied & Shiba, 2007), expanded their study abroad programs to include less traditional study abroad locations and shorter trips (Fischer, 2008), increased international student enrollments (Scott, 1994; Bartell; 2003), increased involvement of student affairs professionals in campus internationalization efforts (Dalton, 1999), and have worked to internationalize faculty (Schwietz, 2006). The campus internationalization literature also addresses the notion of aligning internal campus cultures with internationalization objectives (Bartell, 2003). This is based on the notion that if institutional leadership is amenable to internationalization, and if faculty is open to the process (Craufurd & Nacht, 1991; Schoorman, 1999), internationalization efforts will move forward. Factors such as leadership, bureaucratic structure, and fluidity of campus processes are important drivers of campus internationalization.
Internationalization is viewed as a process (Knight, 2004), heavily contingent upon institutional culture and climate (Strange, 2003) that, when properly guided and supported, will address students’ global competencies. It can be top-down in orientation, and policy-driven in ways that may or may not take into account the experiences, needs, and realities of undergraduates’ lives. Overall, the pace of US campus internationalization continues to be slow and uneven (Koch, 2008), with intentional aspects of internationalization reaching only a small portion of domestic undergraduate students.

**Socioeconomic Factors**

US undergraduate participation in study abroad is linked with race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background (Dessoff, 2006). The 2008 worldwide economic downturn is not helping in this regard as students seek to study in less expensive destinations, while choosing to participate in shorter programs (Fischer, 2008). Despite the upward trend in US students studying abroad, according to the Lincoln Commission – a 17-member Commission established by Congress in 2004 to recommend a program to greatly expand the opportunity for students at institutions of higher education in the United States – the proportion of American college students who study abroad annually amounts to less than 2% of the American college student enrollment (Lincoln Commission, 2006). In addition, the demographics of US study abroad students are not diverse. According to the Institute for International Education, during the 2006-07 academic year, of the 241,800 US study abroad students, 65.6% were female, with 81.9% of those students classified as Caucasian, 6.7% Asian-American, 6% Hispanic, 3.8% African American, 1.2% multiracial, and 0.5% Native American (IIE, 2008). Additionally, the percentage of representatives of certain ethnic groups who study abroad is disproportionate to their percentage of their respective ethnic group’s total college enrollment. For example, African Americans comprise 11.3% of total US post-secondary enrollment, yet only 3.8% of all US students that studied abroad during the 2006-07 academic year were African American (IIE, 2008). Caucasians make up 57.5% of the total US post-secondary enrollment, yet 81.9% of students participating in study abroad in 2006-07 were Caucasian (IIE, 2008).

The literature also points to issues of socioeconomic class as playing a role in US undergraduates’ willingness to study abroad. Alan Dessoff writes about the factors that contribute to a student’s predisposition toward participating in international activities, noting that study abroad may be considered frivolous by first-generation American college students (Dessoff, 2006). Dessoff indicates that one’s economic class contributes to one’s predisposition toward engaging in international experiences during college. Class and first-generation status are often related. Dessoff uses first-generation status as a proxy for class background.

Parochialism among US undergraduates has the potential to worsen as future demographic shifts in the US undergraduate population bear out. Murdock & Hoque (1999) write about how the growing minority student population in the USA will have limited access to resources. The result is that institutions of higher education will need to be increasingly involved in remediation, fundraising, and recruitment in order to sustain their enrollment levels (Murdock & Hoque, 1999). Murdock & Hoque write about how, by 2050, the US undergraduate population will be more diverse, that the net increase in the college student population will come from minority students, and that between 1990 and 2050, 31% of enrollment increases will come from students aged 30 and older (1999). These trends do not bode well for study abroad participation, or for the internationalization of the undergraduate student population unless intentional institutional internationalization efforts are targeted to better meet the needs of a more diverse student population. In her article 'The Many Dimensions of Student Diversity’, Elaine El-Khawas writes about the impact that background characteristics (e.g. race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background) and situational factors (e.g. part-time study, jobs, degree objectives, transfer students) have on shaping the barriers that students face (El-Khawas, 2003). According to El-Khawas, many low-income students do not receive the same information from their parents that other students do; these students miss out on the critical social and cultural capital that helps engender a greater awareness of international education opportunities. As this low-income student cohort increases, institutions of higher education will need to be more responsive to their needs. Will study aboard
continue be perceived by low-income students as something peripheral to their undergraduate experience (Dessoff, 2006), or will the effects of one’s socioeconomic background be overcome via proactive campus internationalization efforts that seek to engage a more diverse particular student demographic?

The literature illustrates who is not studying abroad. It also provides a broad context within which campus internationalization takes place, and it does a fair job of discerning what types of social factors facilitate study abroad. However, it does not address the need for a transparent link between campus internationalization efforts and the real-world constraints of students who either do, or do not, possess a degree of international awareness. This study hypothesizes that having an understanding of undergraduates’ backgrounds, resources, and constraints may help guide campus internationalization efforts in a way that enhances the participation of a more diverse student cohort, be it in study abroad, or in other international education activities.

The Study

The study participants include undergraduates at Porter College who participated for at least one semester in a study abroad program during their undergraduate career. In all cases, each student studied abroad during the previous academic year. Interviews were conducted with 10 students, all but one of whom was female. Eight were Caucasian, one was mixed race, and one was Hispanic. The study sample was small, and thus represents only an illustration of the broader literature review and comparison with other case studies.

In-depth dialogues were used as the central data-gathering method, allowing participants to tell their own stories. An open-ended, non-directive interviewing technique was used to gain an understanding of a range of perspectives (Seidman, 2006). Because each of the participants had studied abroad, the open coding process allowed for the identification of multiple realities across the dialogues. Finding a deeper sub-text across participant experiences proved to be a challenge, given that on the surface, participants’ stories were not too dissimilar. The challenge was to dig deeper to ensure that participants’ local meanings and concerns (Emerson et al, 1995) were carefully evaluated within their respective contexts. To do this, the data were categorized, then coded to extract common themes. Since the emerging themes were similar, the information was revisited in order to bring the participants’ individual contexts and stories to life.

Study Abroad at Porter College

Out of 11,400 students at Porter College, 88 earned academic credit towards their degree through study abroad during fall 2004 and spring/summer 2005 according to the Porter College 2006 Open Doors Data Collection report. Of the total, four of the 88 student participants studied abroad for one year, with the majority, or 61%, spending one semester abroad. Some 72% of the total study abroad participants at Porter College were female, 47% were academic seniors, and 90% were Caucasian. Twenty-eight percent of Porter College study abroad participants majored in the Fine or Applied Arts, while no students from either Engineering or Health Sciences studied abroad. Business was represented by three students. Of the top receiving countries, Italy ranked highest with 25 students. Italy was followed by the United Kingdom, India, Australia, and Spain. What is evident is that Porter College’s study abroad student demographic mirrors a national pattern of low study abroad participation among minority groups, and high participation among Caucasian undergraduates.

Study Findings

Institutional Pull

With the study based on students’ backgrounds, resources, and experiences, it becomes evident that institutional pull factors, namely institutional characteristics designed to facilitate student participation in study abroad, are supportive or not of students’ study abroad plans. Institutions that value the infusion of diversity experiences into the college curriculum, and that are supportive of out-of-class experiences, tend to be supportive of study abroad (Kuh et al, 2005). Other common
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characteristics of institutions that support study abroad include: offering short-term cultural immersion programs; establishing campuses abroad; integrating international experiences into the curriculum; permitting institutional aid to travel with students whether or not they attend a program affiliated with that institution; and instituting rigorous language programs. Access to funding, institutional or private, is also a characteristic of institutions that support study abroad experiences for their students. Other than some small donor-defined funding opportunities, Porter College does not offer students such supports. Institutional type also has salience in terms of influencing student participation in study abroad. For example, according to the Lincoln Commission, small liberal arts colleges send a larger proportion of students abroad, while community colleges send just 2.5% of their students abroad even though they enroll nearly 40% of all American undergraduates (Lincoln Commission, 2006). The data suggests that institutional pull factors at Porter College are weak.

A Priori Awareness and Convergence

The data suggests that if a student already possesses an international awareness, then institutional pull will facilitate international involvement. However, awareness without convergence diminishes the likelihood that a student will study abroad. Convergence is the accumulation of resources, a sense of agency, and answers to real-world concerns (e.g. credit transfer) that combine to build on students’ awareness, thereby increasing the likelihood that the student will study abroad. Jill is a case in point. A student from a poor socioeconomic background, Jill was aware of study abroad. What made the difference for her was how the experience fitted into her undergraduate curriculum and broader life plan. Would the financial aid come through? For Jill, the answers to these concerns converged to enable her to study abroad. For Alexis, an assertive, independent-minded fashion and textile design major, ‘Study abroad does get in the way’. With her busy job as a stylist, and laser-like focus on her studies, studying abroad was an ‘add-on’, something that she did not need. Ultimately, however, for both Jill and Alexis, their initial awareness of study abroad was facilitated by a convergence of factors that minimized the drawbacks and emphasized the benefits of studying abroad.

Alexander Astin’s (1998) Input–Environment–Output framework for student change is instructive. According to Astin, students bring inputs from their lives to college, such as socioeconomic background, ethnicity, and gender. These factors mix with environmental elements in the form of faculty, peers, programs, and learning opportunities, resulting in outputs such as increased knowledge, improved graduation rates, and greater life opportunity (Astin, 1998). Awareness and convergence borrow from this peer/environment model, with awareness serving as a powerful input, convergence playing the role of environment, and the study abroad experience representing the outcome. It is a useful construct because it helps clarify that before and during-college elements can converge to increase students’ global perspectives. It makes the case for the significant role the institutional environment has on students’ international involvement. It also helps to understand how institutional approaches to internationalization, and diversity experiences in general, can have a net positive effect on parochial students’ international perspectives. For students, the awareness input may be delayed, or may have never been nourished, but through the convergence of institutional inputs, the outcome for these students may result in something they had not anticipated, namely a study abroad experience, or even an enhanced global profile.

Overcoming Financial Barriers

Financial barriers can be overcome; the study participants prove this. What makes the financial barrier so salient to participants’ ability to study abroad is its linkage with so many other constraining factors, including family and work responsibilities and other individual limitations. The data reveals that financial resources can be found if the student’s desire to study abroad is strong enough. For the study participants, the need to work, and income lost during the study abroad experience, did not strongly factor into their study abroad decisions. Convergence was not subverted for the sake of more urgent priorities. The data reveals that within the context of their other responsibilities, studying abroad was not superfluous to getting a degree. Unlike for many
non-traditional-age students, the data shows that the combination of outside responsibilities and cost did not serve as insurmountable obstacles to studying abroad.

**Overcoming Fear**

Jane had no fears about studying abroad. An admitted go-getter, she was proactive about the process. She spoke about how fear constrains many students from taking advantage of study abroad opportunities. Fear seems to be a common element not only for students who have no interest in studying abroad, but also for those students who do have an interest, particularly in advance of the experience itself. Students and parents are justifiably concerned about personal safety, where the students will live once overseas, and how they will manage on their own. However, fear can be overcome. The literature shows that fear of going abroad can become conflated with race and ethnicity. Minority students have a fear of encountering prejudice abroad, or have real concerns about the under-representation of minorities in foreign countries (Norfles, 2006). Even students who are passionate about studying abroad have a fear of racial or ethnic prejudice. What became clear from the data was the students’ ability to subvert fear. What would Eleanor have done had she not fulfilled her dream of living in Australia while building on her interest in the indigenous Aboriginal culture? If fear had been the driver, Alexis would not have returned from Siena, only to participate in a national student exchange program in Florida. The literature does not capture the role of small triumphs and personal victories in a student’s journey toward study abroad. The most important decisions are made quietly and with conviction. Just as in the case of financial barriers, fear, the data showed, could be overcome.

**Emergent Identities and Voice**

Studying abroad opens eyes, challenges, and translates dreams into foreign languages. The experience tests students in new ways, and takes away their supports. This can be disorienting and uncomfortable. For all participants, an enhanced sense of an American identity was a common leitmotif of their study abroad experiences. A number of them even felt ambassadorial. James felt as if he was representing the United States in Puebla, Mexico. His ambassador role worked in reverse as well, as he worked to counter stereotypes about Mexico by providing American students with a realistic picture of Mexican life. The citizen diplomat role became salient for the students while abroad.

The student development literature is informative here. For Marcia B. Baxter Magolda, voice represents ‘the movement from reciting the knowledge of others to articulating an individual perspective’ (Baxter Magolda, in Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 41). Baxter Magolda writes that during their twenties, young adults pass through various phases on their way to self-authorship (2001). Voice then becomes highly significant for students who study abroad because expressing one’s individual perspectives in a foreign setting becomes a necessary tool. One’s ability to voice one’s own perspectives becomes, in effect, one’s identity when abroad. The literature on student psychosocial development also provides broader context. The sixth vector of Arthur Chickering’s seven vectors of student development addresses how a student develops purpose (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Such questions as ‘who am I going to be?’ arise during this stage. Sense of self continues to emerge during this stage, though it morphs into an action stage, the seventh vector, in which students collect experiences and define their values in ways that are internally consistent (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The literature also shows that students appear to gain in their internal locus of control (i.e. they can influence what happens to them) from study abroad (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Across all of the participant dialogues, the maturation process and identity development were fluid processes, contingent upon a host of factors, both external and internal.

**Formal and Informal Mentors**

Study abroad represented one way for study participants to become more cosmopolitan. However, the path to study abroad is fraught with ambiguity. At some point, the seed has to be planted in the
mind of the student to set things in motion. From what source does that seed come? For Micheline, it took a caring and insightful high school foreign language teacher. For Andrea, it took the love of a devoted and proactive mother to create the conditions for her to actually achieve her childhood dream of living in Australia. Andrea’s mother not only valued education in the household, but served as a role model, pursuing her Master’s degree even with teenagers still in the home. For Alexis, it was a professor of Italian who encouraged her to participate in the Siena program, while for Jane, it was her mother who provided the enabling environment for her to study dance and theater in Manchester. Mentors, be they family, peer, or instructor, helped make it possible for these students to study abroad. The data showed that the give and take between the participants and their formal and informal mentors made all the difference in their decision to study abroad because these interactions not only assuaged their fears, but also afforded them access to important information networks.

Conclusions/Implications

Initial Profile Validated

The initial conception of the elements of which a global American student profile is comprised was validated, in part, by the data. Most were middle class, with supportive two-parent families that place considerable value on education. Participants viewed study abroad as something to set themselves apart from others. As anticipated, they were not debt-averse; they recognized long-term value in return for their short-term financial investment. Related to this willingness to take on debt is the notion of agency, a sense that one can make things happen for oneself. All participants evidenced a strong sense of this. As expected, the participants were high achievers, were mainly Caucasian females, and were employed. While socioeconomics, gender, and race do seem to factor heavily in student awareness of international experiences, the students were not from wealthy families. Based on the data, a connection between growing up in a middle-class household and study abroad seems to exist.

A Self-Contained Experience

Even after their study abroad experience, participants had a limited sense of ‘internationalness’. For most, the experience was a self-contained one, with minimal cross-fertilization with other aspects of their lives. The degree of emergent cosmopolitanism varied among the study participants, indicating that learning takes place via a diversity of experiences, and in ways that have long-term resonance for some students more than others. For institutions that are trying to address the problem of undergraduate parochialism through internationalization, the notion of student learning occurring in various ways lends credence to the value of short-term exchanges, and to other creative international programming, as ways to provide meaningful growth opportunities for an increasingly diverse student population.

Dynamic Reciprocal Relationship

A ‘push–pull’ dynamic needs to exist between students and their institution, with the push defined as student resources, awareness, and affinity toward engaging in the study abroad process, while the institutional pull includes the institution’s efforts to involve students in study abroad and with other international education experiences. The data reveals that the push requires an a priori student awareness of study abroad that includes knowledge of returned students’ experiences, family support, the ability to access financial resources, and informal and formal mentor support. The institutional pull component mandates that institutions make the study abroad opportunities known via a variety of marketing methods, including meaningful, accessible, and frequent returned study abroad student discussions, in-class presentations, a returned study abroad student network, and study abroad requirements for specific majors. The pull needs to be multi-pronged and sustained by the institution with resources, ample staff, and administrative infrastructure. Institutional pull must also be informed by the realities of students’ lives so that international opportunities, namely study abroad, have salience for a broader cross-section of students.
Socioeconomic Limitations

The data reveals that middle-class undergraduates can afford to study abroad only if they are able to piece together funding support from disparate funding streams. Without this, even middle-class students are unable to afford a study abroad experience. Further research needs to be conducted into creative financing mechanisms that have the potential to facilitate more diverse undergraduate participation in study abroad. If middle-class undergraduates with significant family resources and supports are struggling to fund their study abroad experience, then those students without similar resources and supports struggle even more. For these students, study abroad becomes an unattainable goal.

Changing Student Demographics

Related to this under-representation in study abroad based on socioeconomic background is the notion that study abroad is not keeping up with changing US undergraduate demographics. More research is needed to address this gap. All participants were traditional-age students, defined as being undergraduates under the age of 24. All were non-commuters, took a full course load (at least 12 credit hours), were unmarried, and did not have children. In effect, their lives made it easier for them to study abroad than for a married student with children. Even with the definition of a non-traditional-age student having been broadened in 2002 by the Department of Education to include those who delay enrolling after high school, who work full-time, are financially independent, are married or have children, or completed high school with a general equivalency degree (US Department of Education, 2002), non-traditional-age student participation in study abroad is minimal at best. Given that the same study found that nearly three-quarters of US undergraduates had at least one of these non-traditional-age student attributes (2002), more research is needed to elucidate the critical link that exists between accessibility of internationalization efforts and non-traditional-age student participation. Study abroad no longer has the luxury to retreat into the comfortable parameters in which it currently finds itself. The changing US student demographic will require study abroad to be more open and accessible.

Conclusion

Having an understanding of students’ backgrounds, resources, and constraints may enable US institutions of higher education to target campus internationalization efforts to better meet the global learning needs of their students. An emergent global student profile reveals who is not studying abroad, the obstacles that students must overcome, and the realities that students face when contemplating a study abroad experience. Armed with the data, the hope is that campus internationalization efforts – and study abroad in particular – will be informed by this emergent global American undergraduate student profile so that study abroad experiences are accessible to a broader student demographic, particularly as the student demographic in the USA becomes poorer, more diverse, and older.

References

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