

Good Faith or Hard Data? Justifying Short-Term Programs

IT IS NO LONGER SURPRISING that colleges and universities are increasingly utilizing short-term study abroad models: such programs are cost effective and well-received by participants. However, it is surprising that few, if any, studies have been conducted to assess the value of such programs or describe the impact of the short-term program model on students. Institutions are, for the most part, proceeding on the good-faith assumption that such a study abroad experience is valuable. And while the assumption may eventually prove to be correct, the absence of hard data to justify the short-term programs raises the question of whether or not the institution may be expending considerable effort and financial resources on something of little worth. Furthermore, with no formal assessment of a program's impact, it is difficult to know how to improve it.

This lack of program assessment is the root concern for institutions utilizing, or considering offering, short-

term study abroad programs. Short-term program development needs to be tracked to determine the fulfillment of the program's aims and intentions. Institutions of higher education should also determine the program's impact on students, particularly from the students' perceptions—after all, it is their education and their experience. Clearly, long-term overseas educational programs impact students academically. The question becomes: do short-term study abroad programs have educational impact or, more importantly, do they have an intrinsic value?

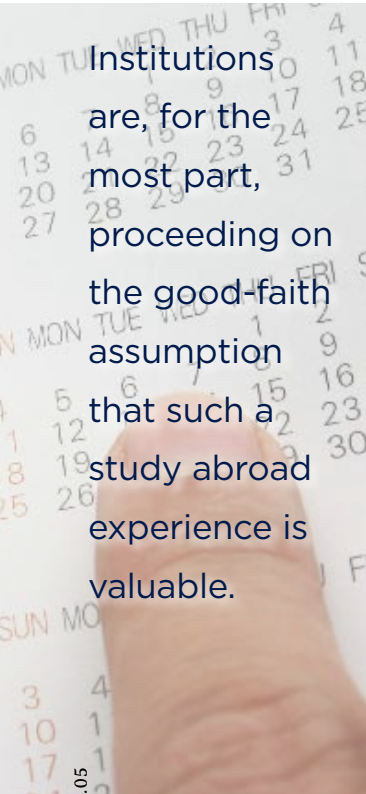
Developing a Study in Four Parts

To begin tracking the value of short-term study abroad programs, a study was conducted on two cohorts of undergraduate students who participated in a three-and-a-half week program in Europe, in particular, the Czech Republic, during the autumn of 2002 and 2003. Typically, short-term study abroad programs run from mid June until early July or during term breaks. However, at this particular university, the program ran from mid September to mid October and the program participants were international business majors. The program was faculty driven in that the faculty members were responsible for every aspect of the curriculum, agenda, schedule, logistics, budget, teaching, and facilitation. Although this model requires careful administrative and educational coordination on behalf of the participating

faculty members, it also allows for institutional and faculty control of the study abroad format and the quality of the curriculum.

The focus of this emerging design case study is to determine the impact short-term programming has on participant's construction of knowledge. The complete study includes four sections. The first summarizes and describes the historical development of the institutions international study abroad term, which is specific to the institution's College of Business. The second investigates the aims and intentions of the study abroad program from an administrative and faculty standpoint. The third describes the conditions and opportunities this program model provides for students, from both the participating faculty members' and students' perspectives. The focal point of the study explores the impact on students was analyzed in four categorical areas: linguistic awareness, cross-cultural perception, attitudinal reflection, and student perception of academic skill development during the three-and-a-half-week program.

This study recognized that these challenges are inherent in study abroad programming. However, when evaluating international education opportunities, educators often fail to consider the students' perceptions of their experiences. Oftentimes, students' reactions to their experiences with language barriers, host country nationals, culture shock, and increased self confidence are overlooked when these programs are evaluated.



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This study attempted to shed light on the students' perceptions of their experiences to articulate meaningful conclusions about the impact of short-term immersion programs on students.

Methodology

Students were invited to participate at varying levels as informants for this study. All students from both cohorts were asked to keep written journals of their experiences. Students responded to open-ended questions presented to them and wrote freely about their encounters and daily activities. A second group of six students, randomly selected, kept written journals and participated in formal and informal interview sessions. Questions were posed to the student participants and their responses before, during, and after the program were audio taped. Finally, a total of three randomly selected students served as the focal points for embedded case studies. These three students participated in all data collection methods and engaged in focus group sessions and extensive participant observation following their study abroad program. Embedded case studies were utilized to depict the various kinds of impact that the program had on students. The student data are reported in a narrative format in an attempt to capture, in their own words, the value of the short-term program and the extent to which it affected them, both educationally and personally.

Competency vs. Intrinsic Value

Typically, quality and accomplishment of academic outcomes have been closely scrutinized in international education. The increasing preoccupation with quality in higher education is linked to the call for accountability by national governments, the corporate world, and students (de Witt 2002). However, the truth is that it is difficult to measure the quality or success of a study abroad program. Many authors have attempted to quantify quality by prescribing certain desired outcomes to international study abroad programs. These outcomes range from students' cognitive development, to meeting national objectives, to intrinsic qualities, such as personal growth and cultural sensitivity. According to Engle and Engle (1999), "The presiding goal of study abroad, *la raison d'être* distinguishing it from study on the home campus, is to present the student participants with a challenge—the emotional and intellectual challenge of direct, authentic cultural encounters and the guided reflection upon those encounters." Examining the intrinsic or fundamental value of study abroad involves exploring evidence of overall global citizenship in comparison to academic outcomes or athletic performance.

The key question is: What goals and objectives can be accomplished by utilizing a short-term model? If it can be determined that there is a significant impact after only three-and-a-half weeks, then institutions that promote international study abroad programs can find better ways to continue to develop their short-term programs and accounting for their academic rigor and quality will

not be such an issue. Ultimately, the goals of short-term study abroad will be redefined in terms of their intrinsic value rather than a focus on cognitive development. In the end, if it can be determined that students will emerge from these programs with a deeper appreciation for cultural differences, a more open attitude toward foreign travel and life, and a genuine interest in language study, then the program should be considered valuable. It is then up to administrators and faculty to decide if this is equally as important as conquering skill sets.

Primary Institutional Questions

The following questions were explored with university administrative members and key faculty to create a backdrop for the short-term study abroad program model to be explored. The purpose was to discover the historical development of the program and to determine if administrators and faculty members had similar or distinctly different opinions on the outcomes and impacts.

- What is the historical development of the institution's international study abroad model?
- What are the aims and intentions of the program in terms of student outcomes?
- What are the intentions from an administrative perspective?
- What are the intentions from a faculty perspective?
- What conditions and opportunities does this particular study abroad model provide to students?
- What opportunities and conditions were built into the program by the faculty?
- How do the students perceive the opportunities provided? Were they meaningful? Were they rigorous? Could they have been accomplished if faculty did not have expertise and contacts in the region?

The data collected from the informants was useful in creating the historical development of the short-term model and how it changed over time to have a stronger academic focus. The results of the data also revealed that administrators and faculty had very different opinions on the overall value of the program. For administrators, the benefit was a higher level of student retention and a revenue-generating feature for the university. For faculty, the important aspect of the short-term study abroad model was the creation of unique international opportunities that impacted students' overall educational experience in a positive way. This was accomplished by providing students with the both an academic component and an opportunity to experience the cultural aspects of international study and travel.

Primary Student Questions

The following questions go to the heart of this study, which is to determine how short-term study abroad impacts students at the undergraduate level. The data were collected for two consecutive years on two different groups that traveled overseas for three and a half weeks. The data were reported in a narrative format as embedded case studies to depict the students' perceptions of their experience

in their own words.

- How are students impacted by the program in terms of their linguistic awareness and to what extent?
- How are students impacted by the program in terms of their cross-cultural perceptions and to what extent?
- How are students impacted by the program in terms of their attitudinal reflection upon return and to what extent?
- How do the student participants feel that they have been impacted by the program in terms of their academic skill development and to what extent?

Data to Conclusions

Several conclusions can be reached from each of the four research categories. To reach conclusions about the value of short-term study abroad, data were collected during a period of five months in the fall of 2002 and 2003. The participants engaged in journal writing, informal interviews, structured interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. Their responses provided data that enriched highly detailed student case studies embedded into the overall institutional case. Creswell (1998)

described the case study approach as an exploration of a “bounded system” that occurs over time and through detailed, in-depth data collection; it involves multiple sources of information that provide a rich context. Utilizing this method was useful because it lead to an accurate depiction of the nature and complexity of students’ reactions and feelings in regard to their international and cultural experiences. More importantly, it facilitated the effort to capture these experiences in the students’ own words, thus revealing very clear interpretations of their experience, which were then reported in the embedded case studies.

Although a number of similar themes were established with regard to overall impact, there were also highly individual themes. There is evidence that even though the students were engaged in a highly structured program, their individual construction of knowledge varied greatly. The concept of individuality and the uniqueness of each student’s construction of new knowledge should be seen as one of the major strengths of international programming. At varying levels, the students realized that they had

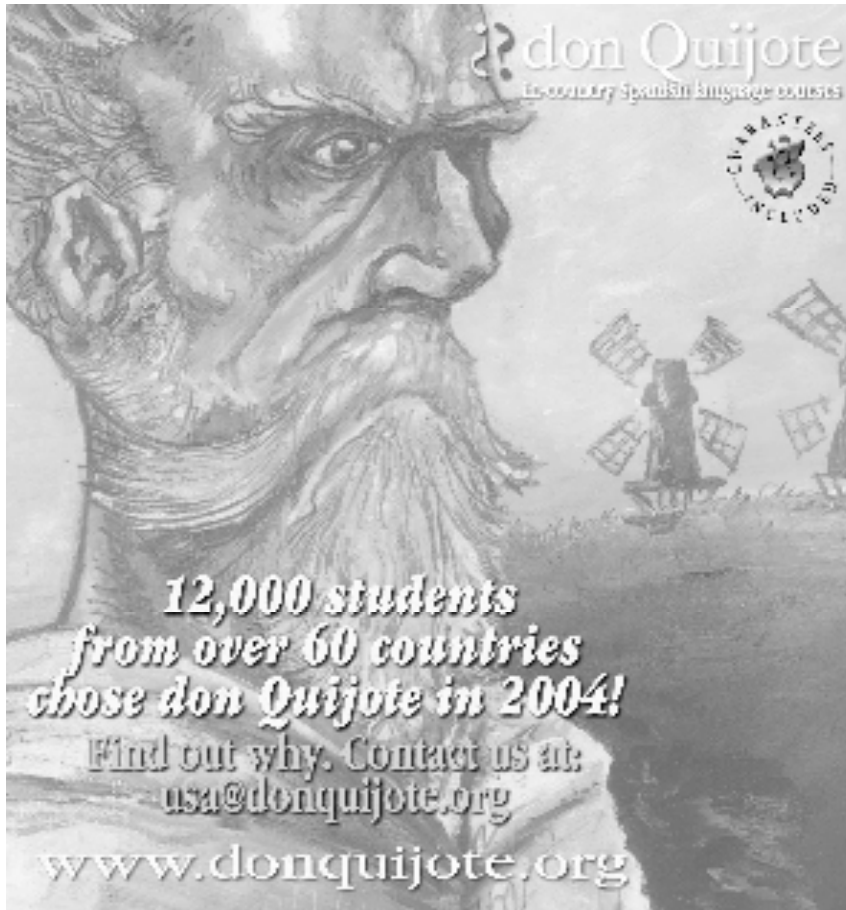
much more thinking and analysis to do, not only about themselves as world citizens, but also about how they will fit into the global context.

Overall Impacts

In *Encounters with Difference: Student Perceptions of the Role of Out-of-Class Experiences in Education Abroad*, Laubscher (1994) outlined a portion of the students’ perceptions of primary learning outcomes. Laubscher postulated that no study would be complete without identifying what the students felt they gained in terms of their out-of-class experiences. In each of the four categories, every attempt was made to interpret the data from the student’s perspective. Additionally, some overriding conclusions can be made with respect to short-term study abroad, which are different from longer-term programs.

Despite varying levels and degrees of development and construction of new knowledge, certain common themes will emerge as a direct result of the short-term program because the students were engaged in the same program. By closely examining the students’ perceptions of their learning, both the academic and intrinsic benefits gleaned from the qualitative data illustrate that significant development took place—at least in the minds of the students. Although it may appear superficial, this is a critical discovery.

To summarize, several broad conclusions can be made regarding the four research areas in terms of the overall impact the study abroad experience had on students. First, through these experiences, learners built upon some of their most basic ideas about language and culture. In terms of linguistic and cultural awareness, students emerged with a greater level of sensitivity and patience. This in turn led them to move from a fundamental understanding of the concepts to a more sophisticated interpretation of them. Second, most students adapted to the practical challenges they encountered by finding mechanisms to help them cope with their new surroundings. Third, most students admitted that they initially knew very little about the countries and cities they planned to visit or had major misconceptions about



the nature of the people. Although they did some research about each destination prior to departure, the real essence of this learning about the cultural aspects and how to make sense of them, came from their firsthand experience.

Linguistic Awareness

Several specific conclusions can be about each of the four research categories. With regard to their linguistic awareness, students' perceptions of both their inability to speak a second language and their increased level of appreciation for the value of foreign language was a catalyst of profound impact.

For the purposes of this study, since it does not assess language acquisition, it is necessary to define linguistic awareness. Laubscher (1994) suggested that linguistic awareness is obtained by the heightened sense of awareness one encounters as a result of traveling from one country to another. Using this as a basis, exploration took place to identify how students were coping with their interaction with foreign language.

- Students were moderately shocked with their first encounter of hearing foreign languages being spoken. Initially, there was confusion and at least some level of anxiety about not understanding both spoken language and signage.

- Students became more patient and tolerant of speakers of foreign languages. The level of tolerance increased as students progressed through the program and once they returned.

- Students developed coping mechanisms to facilitate communication while abroad. These included hand gestures, pointing, and watching the facial expressions of speakers.

- Students recognized that many Americans are monolingual and became frustrated with themselves for not having previously learned a foreign language.

Essentially, these linguistic outcomes, which are intrinsic in nature, are considered difficult to measure. They do, however, on a broad scale, challenge students to express ideas in more than one language, or at least to be sensitive to language barriers, and encourage students to approach unfamiliar situations without anxiety.

Cross-Cultural Perspectives

According to Barbara Burn, monocultural people initially view the world in a limited fashion. She pointed out that, no matter how globally oriented and cosmopolitan we might think that we are, each of us can make real progress toward expanding our perspective, consciousness, and empathetic understanding (1991). The results of the student's perceptions give way to conceptual themes of global relevance and the importance of respecting the views and values of other traditions and cultures.

- Most students had no idea what to expect to find culturally, especially with former Eastern European countries, and often had mistaken ideas about what they might find.

- Students felt that they needed to become more aware of world events.

- Students believed that getting to know host country locals was imperative to better understand culture. However, it is unlikely that many lasting friendships will emerge from the minimal exposure.

- Students felt that Americans need to better adapt in foreign settings. In Prague, initial feelings of anxiety were very apparent due to the vast differences.

- Students became more aware of the cultural aspects of doing business.

Based on these themes, numerous valuable and important conclusions have been identified indicating that, in fact, there are many positive outcomes that have been iden-

tified as a result of participating in a short-term study abroad program. Students here have a greater understanding of what it takes to participate in a global society, namely, they realized they needed to pay more attention to international issues. In turn, one could conclude that the underlying purpose of study abroad programs is to expose students to different cultures, ultimately producing better managers, better international relations, and better global citizens.

Attitudinal Reflection

This study is seeking to describe how the program affected the students' attitudes toward the United States and its people, both during the trip and upon their return. Oftentimes, students expressed their reflections without even being asked any directed questions about their feelings toward their home country. While their attitudes and perceptions, of self and others, continue to evolve, their reflection of what it means to be an American seems to be a catalyst for the most profound impact.

- Students felt Americans were significantly lacking in linguistic and cross-cultural skills. In some cases, students tended to overstate their position that Americans are less diverse than in reality and more two-dimensional.

- Students were embarrassed about being classified as an ugly American. Students categorized Americans as being superficially

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more interested in making more money and owning more and bigger things while Czechs spent time with family and friends.

■ Students felt Americans needed to be more tolerant and lose the “I’m proud to be an American” complex. Many were exposed, for their first time, to people who live marginally and without an abundance of amenities.

The most significant changes occurred in the intrinsic areas, such as heightened awareness about language and culture, more self-confidence, and more independence. Students began to reflect upon behavior and friendliness of the host country nationals in an attempt to draw comparisons to their American way of life.

Perceptions of Academic Skill Development

Universities and other institutions of higher education would hesitate to endorse study abroad programs if the prognosis were weak about its academic outcomes. Typically, quality and accomplishment of academic outcomes have been closely scrutinized by administrators in international education. A careful review of the literature indicates that each international studies program attempts to highlight a noteworthy set of outcomes. The overriding theme related to study abroad outcomes boils down to distinguishing between cultural-based international experiences and knowledge-based endeavors.

The final category explores how the students perceived their academic development was impacted and to what extent. Although the students who participated in the study abroad program did take a five-hour comprehensive final exam, this section does not

attempt to define outcomes or measure competency. Rather, the study seeks to illustrate how students reacted to their construction of new knowledge, as well as their own personal, somewhat intangible goals and growth patterns. This study did not attempt to define outcomes or measure competency, but it depicts, in the students’ own words, what they felt they had gained, either scholastically or personally.

■ Students felt the experience would benefit them in their future careers.

■ Students had more knowledge about the host country destinations they visited. Many of their earlier misconceptions were corrected.

■ Students gained confidence as they traveled and became more experienced with negotiating in their new surroundings, thus preparing them for their independent travel experiences.

■ Most students adapted to the experiential learning concept versus the structured academic setting.

■ All students were impacted by the program, each emerging with different levels of sophistication and awareness.

Experiential learning, like service learning, provides an excellent example of a holistic systems approach that closely links academics and student transformation. This model, particularly as it applies to study abroad programs, is a shift away from the measurement of cognitive skill development and leans more toward constructing soft skills as they relate to cultural awareness and sensitivity and function in the real world. Carefully designed study abroad programs can provide students with unique opportunities to confront new information (whether it is language, culture, or customs) and assimilate it into their existing body of knowledge.

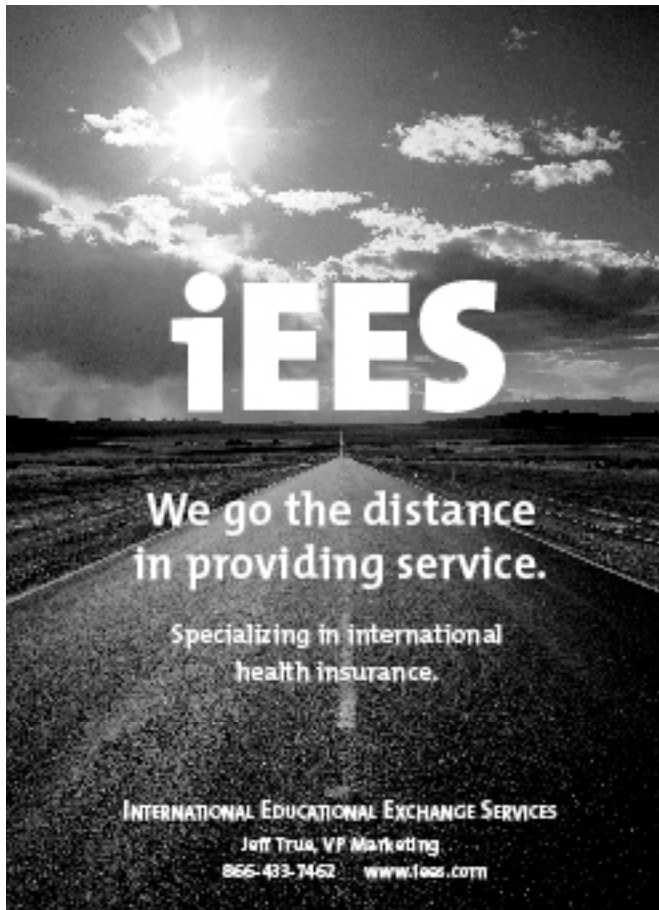
Various forms of overseas education, particularly study abroad programs, are experience-based learning opportunities. According to constructivist theory, study abroad opportunities provide learners with options to study in foreign settings where they are encouraged to invent their own solutions, try out new ideas, and generate their own unique sets of explanations and answers. In addition, they reflect on those experiences that ultimately lead them to interpret their surroundings in a different way.

What Does Not Happen

Due to the nature of the program, its length, and the opportunities set forth, several things did not happen that perhaps might have occurred had the student participants been involved in a longer or different type of study abroad program. What did not happen was related to the concept of tertiary social, defined as the process of entering into the social practices of the foreign language community (Roberts, et al., 2001). Students were not intermixed with locals per se on this program, and they generally spent only limited time with host country nationals. Thus, this program did not allow for real cultural immersion. The following list defines other areas where there was little or no impact, both positive and negative.

■ Most students experienced only mild or no culture shock. The short duration did not allow for extreme levels of culture shock to manifest.

■ The defined academic outcomes were perceived as shallow compared with the intrinsic benefits students felt they had gained. Stu-



dents believed that the academic case studies provided were not as relevant as experiencing businesses first hand.

■ Students did not identify a serious focus or interest in business-related outcomes. Although many students encountered business professionals, the dialogue was social in nature.

■ Students described a high level of dependence on program advisers, indicating that although they gained confidence with travel, they may not have truly taken responsibility for themselves.

These conclusions form the basis for looking closely at the student-related research questions of this study because they mirror the spirit of cultural awareness and global-mindedness within the context of short-term study abroad programs. They also describe, through the use of students' voices, their own perspectives on the outcomes of their study abroad experiences. The conclusions provide strong evidence that the experience, regardless of length, had a lasting impact on a student's artistic and linguistic awareness and in addition to enhancing their professional skills and competencies.

Operating under these outcomes, it can be concluded that there is powerful verification that students are capable of reflecting on their cultural experiences, improving their linguistic awareness or at least making distinctions between different languages, seeing value in making friends from other countries, exhibiting a greater sense of tolerance and patience, and enhancing their understanding of a particular region, economy, or political system. In addition, these experiences help them examine their own strengths and weaknesses in a thoughtful, constructive manner, build their self-confidence and esteem, and

enable them to reflect on how to succeed in a global village. With proof that students are learning to work and interact with peoples of other cultures and obtaining requisite skills to function in a global arena as a result of their short-term study abroad experience, faculty and administrators can feel confident that they are fulfilling one of the key responsibilities of higher education. **IE**

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