

The Purpose of Higher Education and Study Abroad

Arum, Richard and Josipa Roksa. 2014. *Aspiring Adults Adrift: Tentative Transitions of College Graduates*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Blumenstyk, Goldie. 2015. *American Higher Education in Crisis? What Everyone Needs to Know*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Thompson, Robert J., Jr. 2014. *Beyond Reason and Tolerance: The Purpose and Practice of Higher Education*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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What is the purpose of higher education? Why do students decide to go to college, and what are institutions expected to provide to them? Some would suggest that students attend university to get a job; therefore, the purpose of higher education is to help students build the skills and gain the knowledge needed to excel in a particular career. Others may argue that building critical thinking skills or developing one's identity is the primary purpose of attending a college or university. Seasoned professionals in higher education know that defining the purpose of higher education is a broad and complex discussion, oftentimes varying depending on the type of institution; its mission and leadership; the students and community it serves; and the state of local, national, or global affairs. Institutions of higher education, and the study abroad offices within them, stand to gain from 1) considering a wide breadth of purpose, 2) defining the multiple goals of both an undergraduate education in general and a study abroad experience in particular, and 3) articulating the wide variety of possible gains to students.

In her work *American Higher Education in Crisis? What Everyone Needs to Know* (2015), Goldie Blumenstyk contends that yes, indeed, American higher education is in crisis, due to factors such as high costs, questionable quality, and its tendency to reflect or exacerbate the racial and socioeconomic inequities of American K-12 schools. In an accessible question-and-answer format, Blumenstyk offers brief but well-researched answers to questions about students; costs, spending, and debt; leadership pressures; and the future of higher education. Although the question, "What is the purpose of higher education?" does not appear verbatim in any section, one would be hard-pressed not to find oneself reflecting on this question while reading about financial priorities and federal regulations that shape an institution's decisions. Blumenstyk also acknowledges the growing sentiment that labor market benefits are seen as the primary reason for attending college, citing Gallup poll results: "two thirds of Americans now say a very important reason for getting an education beyond high school is 'to get a good job,' and separate surveys of college freshmen at four-year colleges find that 88 percent of them say the same" (Blumenstyk 2015, 4). There does not seem to be much dispute that, over time, the average college graduate will earn more money than someone with only a high school education (Arum and Roksa 2014, 54; Blumenstyk 2015, 5). The study abroad field has also focused on

connecting study abroad with career aspirations, as evident in conference sessions with titles like “Articulating Students’ Intercultural Skills to Employers” and “Gaining an Edge with Education Abroad: The International Experience” (NAFSA 2014 Annual Conference). On my institution’s campus, the returnee workshop “Marketing Your Study Abroad Experience” garnered strong interest among students. But the purpose of higher education and of study abroad can encompass so much more.

Perhaps the most obscured purpose of higher education in today’s job-focused climate is that colleges and universities are a public service, the purpose of which is to “be responsive to societal needs through doing what colleges and universities are uniquely structured to do: generate knowledge and provide an educational experience that prepares students to meet societal needs and realize a meaningful and rewarding life” (Thompson 2014, ix). Overwhelmingly, the “paradigm of a college education as a transaction” (Blumenstyk 2015, 123), or the phenomenon of “higher education [being] framed as a commodity and students as customers” (Thompson 2014, 16), is what students and their families have come to expect. That is, they are accustomed to seeing the primary gains of going to college or doing study abroad defined in terms of personal, individual benefits, not collective, societal ones. Certainly, the societal and community benefits of study abroad can be found if one looks for them. For example, I was moved to teach English as a second language following my struggles with a foreign language during my own study abroad experience. Some of my institution’s study abroad returnees volunteer in bilingual classrooms in our local public school district. Yet, despite their existence, the community benefits of higher education or of study abroad are not emphasized as much as they deserve to be. In our study abroad predeparture orientations, are students content to plan their weekend trips to a dozen different countries in Europe, or are they encouraged to think about ways they might be able to contribute to the families or communities they will be a part of while abroad? After students return to their home campus, do their program evaluations and alumni workshops focus solely on how students can talk about their experience to employers or how their experiences changed their own personal perspectives, or do these programs and workshops encourage reflection on how students can apply their newly acquired skills to the benefit of their peers, institutions, or communities? Emphasizing the greater good of study abroad could potentially help students approach their international experiences with more gravity and maturity than they would when seeing their study abroad experiences primarily as a personal opportunity to see the world.

In *Aspiring Adults Adrift: Tentative Transitions of College Graduates* (2014), Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa discuss their research on recent college graduates and the oftentimes difficult transitions they face upon leaving college and entering the adult world. Using the College Learning Assessment (CLA), an instrument designed to measure a student’s critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills, Arum and Roksa find that these general skills do not improve much over the academic career of the average college student. In fact, “if the CLA was scored on a one-hundred point scale, 36 percent of students would not have demonstrated even a one-point gain” over four years of undergraduate study (Arum and Roksa 2014, 118). For those of us who consider the development of these competencies a central purpose of college education, this statistic alone is alarming. The authors then discuss the relationship that the CLA scores have to emerging adults either being adrift or achieving independence, as defined by their jobs; having financial independence from parents; engaging in romantic relationships; and

increasing levels of civic engagement. One finding relevant to the discussion of the purpose of higher education is that “better performance on the CLA assessment...is associated with a lower likelihood of early-career unemployment, unskilled employment, and job loss” (Arum and Roksa 2014, 133). Interestingly, although perhaps not surprisingly, the purposes of developing critical thinking skills and of fostering job market success for students go hand-in-hand.

One area that Arum and Roksa discuss, which the other works reviewed here do not, is the development of social skills as a central purpose of higher education. Although institutions themselves may not prioritize students’ social development when articulating their missions, it is noteworthy that students themselves view social development as a primary focus of college. In interviews, “graduates repeatedly emphasized how college was meant to develop a particular kind of sensibility—one that was attuned to others, able to read social cues, and able to act appropriately across a range of social situations” (Arum and Roksa 2014, 51). Whether or not we as administrators or faculty agree that social development deserves to be high on the list of college goals, the fact that many students see it as an integral part of college life presents an opportunity for study abroad professionals. Highlighting the development of intercultural communication skills, and expanding students’ networks by connecting them with alumni abroad could serve as attractive aspects of pursuing study abroad.

In *Beyond Reason and Tolerance: The Purpose and Practice of Higher Education* (2014), Robert J. Thompson Jr. argues that the purpose of higher education in today’s global world is to prepare students to “constructively engage ethnic, religious, and political difference” (2). To accomplish this, institutions of higher education must focus on building “evaluative thinking, empathy, and an integrated identity that includes a commitment to civic and social responsibility” in students (Thompson 2014, 2). He highlights study abroad as one of three high-impact educational practices that foster the abovementioned goals; the other two are undergraduate research and service learning. In order for a study abroad experience to have an impact on a student’s “worldview, understanding of others, and sense of identity, agency and efficacy,” students must engage in “processing the experiences through reflection and analysis” (Thompson 2014, 162). This emphasizes what we study abroad professionals already know: reflection on a student’s study abroad experience is an important part of a student’s reentry process. It would be interesting to note whether combinations of Thompson’s high-impact educational practices result in even greater outcomes for students. For example, my institution offers a service learning-focused study abroad program in developing countries around the world, and grants are also available for students to pursue independent research abroad.

Clearly, the purpose of higher education can encompass a wide variety of elements: labor market success; public service to society; and the development of students’ social skills, critical thinking skills, empathy, and commitment to civic engagement, to name a few. Each institution will no doubt prioritize certain elements over others, and study abroad offices are no different. It would be worthwhile to begin or maintain a discussion of purpose in our offices and develop or revise mission statements to include all the relevant goals. Only by articulating our own purpose of higher education, and how study abroad fits within that bigger picture, can we communicate to students all the myriad benefits that study abroad has to offer.