Aligning Assessments: Study Abroad and Undergraduate Learning

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Study Abroad and Undergraduate Learning

- Current state of study abroad assessment

- Why and how does study abroad assessment differ from assessments undergraduate learning generally?
Rationale for Change

• Imperative for study abroad to align with current assessment methodology
• Better definition of learning goals
• Importance of assessment for planning, budgeting, and support
How to advance?

- Knowledge, personnel and systems required

- Connecting with institutional research efforts while honoring study abroad's distinctive character
Aligning Education Abroad Assessment with Measures of Undergraduate Learning

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AAC&U Annual Conference
Washington, DC
27 January 2012
Assessment in U.S. Education Abroad

- Relatively new phenomenon in the field
- Limited attention to topic outside the U.S.
- Assessment inquiries initiated by EA professionals, not assessment specialists
- Creating a research base from individualized projects, building theoretical and methodological constructs as we go
Some good success stories:

- Some major research universities (e.g., UW, MSU) have taken leadership roles in international assessment (in part driven by Title VI demands on NRCs)

- IE assessment is active in key areas (e.g., study abroad, second language learning)
Some key studies:

- Georgetown Consortium Project
- U Minnesota MAXSA Project
- Georgia System GLOSSARI Project
- California CC SOAR Project
- Forum on Education Abroad BEVI Project

HEA Title VI IRS funding has been critical support for many of these projects.
Assessment Instruments and Analytical Models in EA

Well beyond satisfaction surveys....

- Intercultural competence (GCAA)
- Personal development (IDI, CCAI)
- Global perspectives (GPI)
- Skills & knowledge acquisition (ILO)
- Academic achievement (persistence & graduation)
Limitations of Existing Studies

Improvement on prior student/customer satisfaction surveys, but challenges of:

- research design
- data access
- comparability
- sample size
- self-selection
- control groups
- replicability
Limited assessment fundamentals:

- articulation of clear goals and learning objectives
- assessment methods/instruments aligned to those goals/objectives
- ability to distinguish outcomes attributable to intentional program design
- comparative context of EA assessment results with other assessment findings (both within EA & HE)
Other compounding factors:

- Latent bias to "legitimize" study abroad through assessment may skew process and results.

- Proprietary, profit-center interests of both study abroad and assessment instrumentation may influence research design.
Assessment to document activity vs. assessment to document learning gains/academic improvement

ACCOUNTABILITY
- Trumpeting participation numbers
- Justifying resource allocation (e.g., cost/credit hr, program expense to students/parents)

ACADEMICS
- Different, possibly better learning outcomes
- Different, possibly better instructional processes
A Critical Disconnect:

- These efforts largely originate within the study abroad field, not linked to other institutional assessment processes.

- Lack of communication, interaction, and shared understanding between EA & IR
2010 NAFSA Assessment Report’s opening paragraph stated:

“Assessment of U.S. international education needs to be fully integrated into the broader assessment of U.S. higher education. It is important to recognize that international education assessment is indeed part of higher education assessment. Thus, international assessment cannot be segmented from that broader process.”

“At an institutional level, international assessment needs to be part of an institution’s overall assessment plan.”
A Structural Quandary

Possible reasons for the isolation of study abroad assessment from other assessments:

- location of EA within institutional structure
- separation of EA from academic units
- single-person offices, limited time & resources
- lack of assessment expertise in EA
- low institutional priority (counting vs. assessing)
What makes this process so difficult?

- Assumption that EA is *per se* good (no need to waste time telling us what we already know)

- Continued lack of understanding of what EA is and can be

- Still saddled with the belief that anyone can do EA, no special skill sets required or, if present, under-utilized

- Perception that EA can’t be that complicated, and therefore can’t produce complicated outcomes that require complicated assessment
Setting the Same Standards

Need to assess study abroad in the same way we assess other forms of learning:

- for full programs of study abroad (exchanges, JYA, etc.), need to align with assessment of other broad learning processes (e.g., first-year experience, general education)

- for discrete study abroad courses (faculty-led, short-term) need to align with other institutional course assessments augmented by environmental and experiential factors
Outcomes from courses abroad:

- Content acquisition (more/less vs. different/deeper)
- Effective use of learning resources
- Student engagement in the learning process (class participation)
Outcomes from programs abroad:

- Persistence/retention
- Integrated learning
- Impact of shared experience
- Contribution to discipline/major
- Increased interdisciplinary understanding
- Effect on skill development (social, navigational, critical thinking, etc.)
The Challenge Remains...

We need to continue to press forward with (at least) three basic questions of education abroad assessment.
Question #1: What learning outcomes do we expect students to acquire or achieve?

- Need to articulate specific learning outcomes expected from any course or program.
Question #2: To what extent are learning outcomes attributable to intentional program/course design?

Learning outcomes can often be identified, but is their value produced by intentional strategies, or simply good results from random practices?
Question #3: To what extent are these learning outcomes measurable?

- Need to have defined mechanisms to measure outcomes
- Need to have comparable control groups to determine effects
Down from the Pedestal:

- Escaping the prison of assessing EA as a unique, life-changing experience
- Moving toward assessing EA as a part of the many pathways through which students develop skills, knowledge, and attitudes of liberal arts education.
Concrete Steps to Improve through Assessment

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  – What are your institution’s primary intended educational outcomes?
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  – What are your institution’s primary intended educational outcomes?
  – How do your study abroad outcomes contribute to these broader outcomes?
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  – Complex outcomes integrate knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values
  – A college career is composed of a series (connected or disconnected) of experiences
  – Study abroad should be a multi-dimensional contributor to this process
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  – What kind of data do you track besides the participation funnel?
  – And what kind of data would you need to answer questions most important to your campus and programs—types of questions, validity
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  – Is there a unique identifier in the institutional data set for studying abroad? Is it tied to credits or experiences?
  – What kind of data do you track besides the participation funnel?
  – What else do you know about your participants?
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  – Most rankings are based on participation rates or prestige indicators
  – Outcomes assessment is based on learning
  – At their core, these two conceptions of quality don’t match up well
  – However, in the context of limited resources and competing motivations, you may have to pay dubious homage