

The Influences of Study Abroad Experiences

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Many colleges and universities now realize that it is a good educational practice for their students to learn about the relations between nations, global issues, and intercultural relationships (Tate, 2012). The focus of this research study is to investigate aspects of how international study abroad experiences affect the personal and professional identities of U.S. undergraduate students. A survey was used to capture the perceptions and experiences of study abroad students. Most participants report having a positive experience during their study abroad experiences and an increased cultural awareness and international mindedness. On the contrary, there was a small percentage of participants who reported having no desire to learn the language, a minimal interaction with the new culture, isolation, and interacting and only socializing with peers from their home country.

Key Words: international education, study abroad, international students, international programs, international mindedness, and intercultural competence

INTRODUCTION

Globalization is a powerful and emergent influence on education and educational policies and is influencing teaching practices and teacher education at all educational levels. The research community can help policy makers make more informed decisions related to globalization, teaching, and teacher education if a deeper understanding of its influences and impacts are developed (Wang, Lin, Spalding, Odell, & Klecka, 2011). To be competitive in the global arena, nations need their workforce to be adaptable to globalization, develop new ideas, be flexible, collaborate, and communicate effectively with people from different context and environments.

In order for a nation's workforce to develop communicative competence, they must

develop new skills, values, and a willingness to understand different cultures and use such understandings to work with different individuals (Longview Foundation, 2008).

Internationalism is the sense of promoting understanding and cooperation between different nations. Nations and relations between nations have an impact on how we think and what we do. Many colleges and universities now realize that it is a good educational practice to get their students to learn about the relations between nations, global issues, and intercultural relationships. This helps students develop an international mindedness that will allow them to engage in a highly diverse society and enter the nation's workforce with a global mentality that helps them respect national identities and cultural differences (Tate, 2012).

The focus of this research study is to investigate how international study experiences may have affected U.S. undergraduate students. The research question targeted in this study is how alumni of study abroad programs describe the effect of this experience on their personal and professional identities? A survey was used to capture the perceptions and experiences of study abroad students. The goal of this research is to understand whether and how studying abroad might influence students' cultural awareness, cultural literacy, and international mindedness after the experiences. The following literature review will explore how personal identities, cultural sensitivity, career and academic successes, and negative experiences all play a role in how students perceive their study abroad experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A majority of research on study abroad experiences shows that they promote personal and psychological development in college students (Sanchez, 2012). Study abroad programs can increase self-confidence, independence, global competency, and open-mindedness (Drexler & Campbell, 2011; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2015; Tate, 2012). There have been links to the future careers of students, job development, salary, and the likelihood of international employment (Kronholz & Osborn, 2016). Study abroad participants have been known to gain interpersonal skills required for the workforce, which makes them more marketable for the global marketplace (Kronholz & Osborn, 2016). Study abroad programs at the higher education level were originally established as an important component of undergraduate students' learning and cultural awareness. These programs are known to enhance students' awareness of racial, ethnic, and

diverse populations in addition to their academic development (Drexler & Campbell, 2011).

Personal Identities

Some study abroad programs have been compared to experiences that physically challenge and push participants outside of their comfort zones, with goals of teamwork, building self-confidence, and respect for others. Institutions with these programs provide evidence that the study abroad experience contributes to student learning and development (Gray, Murdock, & Stebbins, 2002).

In one study done at Missouri Southern State College, students and faculty were surveyed about the influences from their study abroad experiences. Findings suggested that students who had traveled outside of the US engaged in more on-campus activities after their travel experiences. Students who traveled abroad were significantly more positive about the school's international mission than students who did not have this international experience. Feelings of empathy among students were stronger among those who had participated in international experiences versus those who had not. Student journals reflected that students had increased their cultural, self-awareness, confidence, and maturity (Gray et al., 2002).

Another study focused on community college students who had studied abroad. Typically, community college students tend to be older, female, lower income, and less likely to be white (Drexler & Campbell, 2011). This study aimed to find out if community college students reported enhanced self-development after their international experience. Forty-six pretest and posttest surveys were completed. Results of this study indicated that the study abroad participation had an important effect on student development. Students perceived a developmental change in academic, athletic, interpersonal competence, as well as the ability to respect and communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds as a result of their study abroad (Drexler & Campbell, 2011).

In a similar study, California Community College Student Outcomes Abroad Research project (CCC SOAR) sought to document the effects of study abroad on a range of student success measures. CCC SOAR used mixed-methods design to examine the impact of community college study abroad students and their engagement and successes. One hundred twenty-eight students completed three web-based surveys. The surveys allowed personal experiences to emerge from the study abroad experiences (Raby, Rhodes, & Biscarra, 2014). The first survey

asked about academic and life choices leading to, and resulting from, their study abroad. The second survey compared their study abroad experiences to their domestic class experiences. The third survey allowed students to reflect on the application of the study abroad experience in an academic and professional context (Raby et al., 2014). Survey results indicated that courses taken abroad provided experiences that allowed greater opportunities to learn effectively on their own and to build a stronger context to develop a personal code of ethics. Student reflections indicated that many had gone through personality changes giving them more independence, and confidence by pushing them out of their comfort zone. Some students expressed that they finally found their true selves, and that after this experience they have a new perspective on life and have become better people (Raby et al., 2014). These studies strongly indicate that the study abroad experience has the potential to push participants outside of their comfort zone and build self-confidence.

Cultural Sensitivity

The general aim of the study abroad experience at one mid-western university is to give students more international experience and exposure. This university had its study abroad students complete post-travel reflection. Results showed that these experiences helped students to understand world affairs, international issues, culture, language, geography, economics, and politics (Gray, Murdock, & Stebbins, 2002). Another study done at a community college analyzed pre and post study abroad surveys. Their results showed that study abroad gave students a depth of understanding topics, language immersion, and ability to have serious conversations on race, ethnicity, religion, and politics. Several respondents remarked that they had a great desire to react with the local culture, which gave them a worldly view on life that enabled them to learn content and culture (Raby et al., 2014).

In the health profession, it is desired that students have a heightened sense of cultural sensitivity to enable them to better work with future patients (Gilliland, Attridge, Attridge, Maize, & McNeill, 2016). In one study, two groups of nursing and pharmacy students participated in a study abroad experience for two years. The study included a pre- and post-questionnaire and a reflective journal. Results from this study indicated that the students broadened their awareness of other cultures and cultural practices. Knowledge, skills, and cultural awareness all showed significant gains from before, to immediately following, the trip.

This indicates that there was a shift towards an increased cultural awareness. Results were consistent for both trips (Gilliland et al., 2016).

In the field of social work, the Education Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) requires that all social work programs demonstrate that their graduates are able to engage in diversity and recognize how cultural structures may marginalize, or influence privilege and power. As a result, social work students at one school were asked to engage in a short-term study abroad program as a way to gain this understanding. The study included students who took one or more trips that ranged from one to three weeks. The study used a 50-question Likert scale that assessed change across four subscales: emotional resilience, flexibility/openness, perceptual acuity, and personal autonomy. This instrument was administered as a pre and post-test. Significant changes were found on all four scales. The greatest impact was seen on the scale of emotional resilience. The results of this study indicated that even a short-term study abroad trip could produce changes to a student's cultural adaptability (Mapp, 2012). These studies indicate that the study abroad experience can give students the valuable ability to being culturally adaptable, which is a vital skill regardless of environment (Kelley & Meyers, 1995).

Career and Academic Successes

Study abroad programs have produced a positive impact on learners in terms of intercultural awareness, intellectual, and personal development (Byram and Feng, 2005). One mid-western university had its study abroad students complete post-travel reflection. The student reflections indicated that students who were seeking to begin careers in other countries believed that their study abroad experiences would provide them with career advantages (Gray et al., 2002). Another study was done at a public research university in the southeast U.S. Approximately 50 students took an electronic survey that measured their goals, interests, and talents before and after their study abroad experiences. Students reported significant impacts on their self-knowledge such as interests, values, skills, and future careers. Results revealed that college students' study abroad experiences gave them a more positive outlook on their career options. They reported having a clearer picture of career goals, interests, talents, or vocational identities (Kronholz & Osborne, 2016).

Current research indicates that study abroad produces internationally literate graduates who can effectively navigate the modern, global world. In the CCC SOAR study examined

above, indicators were explored such as retention, completion, and academic and social success for students who had participated in study abroad (Raby et al., 2014). Study abroad opportunities have been identified as a high impact activity that promotes student engagement (Kuh, 2008). Academically engaged students are more dedicated to their studies and have a better chance of completion and success. The more students are engaged the greater potential they have for learning. Others noted study abroad students were more social, motivated, and gained a new perspective on college and career paths. The CCC SOAR study demonstrated that study abroad experiences for students could be life changing and academically changing events (Raby et al., 2014).

A recent study suggested that nearly 85% of 1,008 students who participated in a study abroad program between 2006 – 2011 felt their study abroad experiences helped them to build job skills (Preston, 2012). In one university in a southern U.S. state, two groups were compared, those who had studied abroad for one semester and those who had not participated in study abroad. Academic performance data was analyzed. The study abroad group took more credit hours and had a higher GPAs than the domestic group. The study abroad group also had a higher likelihood of graduating sooner than the domestic group (Xu, DeSilva, Neufeldt, Dane, 2000-2004).

Cultural Literacy

Cultural literacy is the understandings, competencies, attitudes, language proficiencies, participation, and identities necessary for a successful cross-cultural engagement (Heyward, 2002). It is important for today's university graduates to be culturally literate. Culturally literate people possess understandings, competencies, attitudes, and identities necessary for successful living and working in a cross-cultural setting. Intercultural literacy can be seen as a crucial element of a safe, fair, and sustainable global community (Heyward, 2002).

Schools can help young people develop their own sense of identity and culture. A school's choice of curriculum, learning opportunities, and teaching approaches play a huge part in how students succeed in a global environment and have a sense of cultural literacy (Tate, 2012). Many language educators see study abroad programs as an opportunity to not only develop students' linguistic competence, but their cultural awareness and intercultural competence. Study abroad at the university level might improve students' perspective on

members of other cultures.

Negative Experiences

Study abroad can be challenging for some students. Some findings indicated a more negative view of study abroad, with students reporting that their study abroad experience was a 'lost year,' where they lost contact with their home and school (Lewis & Stickler, 2000) . Negative experiences might also reinforce stereotypes (Lewis & Stickler, 2000). Students need to cope with the stresses of living away from home and adapting to new academic and social environments. How a student responds to these challenges can have an effect on their academic self-efficacy and psychological well-being (Mak & Kim, 2011). Some study abroad students isolate themselves with other students of the same culture or with those who are participating in their study abroad group. Students seek support from people of the same country and culture because they can easily share common interests and understandings. Study abroad experiences take students outside of their comfort zone (Bodycott, 2015), and how a student reacts to these new experiences depends largely on the strength of his or her identity (Mayer 2009). Personal identities control how open students are to new experiences and the likelihood of development and change regarding their cultural competence. Creating social relations with locals is common among study abroad students. These relations help the student deal with acculturation. However, some students struggle with this and prefer to stick to their own cultural group from their home country. This can make it challenging for the study abroad student to fit in and to learn the cultures and customs. This can also lead to a negative study abroad experience where the student has felt alone and lost during his or her time in another country (Bodycott, 2015).

METHODS

Research Design

This qualitative study was conducted to explore the experiences and influences of study abroad alumni. The instrument used was an open-ended survey (See Appendix) that captured the perceptions and experiences of study abroad alumni. During the initial phase of data collection, I sent out recruitment messages via social media and e-mail. I emailed the survey initially sent to friends and colleagues as a convenience sample and to available former students who were

known to have studied abroad. Later, I shared the survey with new groups of people through several participants and their networks. Eventually the survey was shared with about 500 people via social media. Forty-two people completed the survey electronically through Google Forms. Participants were given the option of providing their name or not. If they agreed to participate in the survey, I followed up by sending them the survey. However, if they did not respond at all, or responded that they did not want to participate, no survey was sent to them.

I designed the survey questions to capture the former study abroad students' experiences and perceptions on whether or not their time in another country had any effect on their international mindedness or cultural proficiency. The survey asked participants to describe their experiences, which country they visited, what languages were spoken, was any orientation given, influences from experience, greatest take-away and about their recent travel experiences.

All 42 participants were over the age of 18 and studied abroad as part of their graduate or undergraduate studies. The survey did not ask the current age of the participant. Providing a name on the survey was optional. Through the use of snowball sampling a wide range of alumni and experiences were captured. Participants had previously attended a wide selection of colleges and universities and studied abroad experiences spanned 19 different countries. The survey was also completed by one participant from China, who completed their study abroad experiences in the U.S.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, I obtained proper Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. As part of the survey all participants provided implied consent. Participants were told that this research was being conducted as an exploration of their perceptions with regard to their study abroad experiences. Participants understood that no information would be shared beyond the scope of the study and results would remain confidential.

This survey was shared via social media and e-mail. This survey posed no harm to subjects. Participants had the option to ignore the recruitment message and not participate. Since participants had to agree to be sent the survey, implied consent was used versus formal consent.

Data Analysis

I used thematic network analysis to analyze data taken from the survey results and to establish codes (Saldaña, 2016). Codes are significant phrases that make meaning (Fuller &

Goriunova, 2014, p. 168). I first gave participant responses preliminary codes that later resulted in a set of final codes (Saldaña, 2016). Some of the final codes emerging from the data analysis were mature, confident, open-minded, independent, adventurous, willing to take risks, increased empathy, increased patience, language, culture shock, refine interests, and increased global perspective. Next, I analyzed the data to search for patterns and to understand how certain codes fit together to form themes. Thinking thematically means scouting the data for main ideas, not just content (Saldaña, 2015). Codes were organized together to form themes. Some key themes that emerged from the data were self-growth, cultural awareness, international mindedness, career and academic success, appreciation for diversity and language, patience and empathy for other cultures, and negative feelings towards study abroad.

FINDINGS

Several themes emerged from this study. Over 90% of students reported having a positive experience that made them more confident, open-minded, independent, adventurous, more willing to take risks, increased empathy, patience, and some reported they came home with a global perspective. Another theme among participants was experiencing self-growth that during the study abroad experience. Approximately half of participants responded that their study abroad experiences influenced their academic and career paths in ways such as moving to the country in which they studied abroad after graduation, changing their majors to focus more on language learning or entering higher education programs. Many participants shared that they still think about their study abroad experiences today. The majority reported having a greater appreciation of culture, patience for other cultures, empathy for different parts of the world, appreciation of diversity, language, and self-growth.

Responses to question number 1, “Do you believe that your international experience may have influenced you in any way?” had some common responses. Some participants increased their cultural awareness and international mindedness saying they had “a more diverse lens” and “a lot more empathy” after studying abroad. Another participant said they had “increased empathy for immigrants/people who don’t know a culture or language well” which demonstrated increased empathy.

Other responses demonstrated the theme of self-growth among the study abroad alumni.

Once respondent stated that she had a “fantastic experience, helped shape my teambuilding experiences and consider issues of power and influence of faculty.” She said it “...allowed me to feel more independent, adventurous and appreciate a different culture and way of life.” Her experience was “mind-opening, confidence-building, being outside your comfort zone also increases your awareness/vulnerability.”

Approximately half of participants studied abroad during their undergraduate years and then moved to pursue their graduate degree in another country after their positive experiences. Almost half of the participants entered into the education field following their study abroad experiences. Approximately one quarter of respondents became English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers in a field where they were exposed to English Learners (ELs). One ESOL teacher described how her study abroad experience influenced her future career successes:

Living abroad also made me more open to meeting people from other countries and see their immigration experience through their eyes. It's why I became an ESOL teacher and am now looking for opportunities to help immigrants' transition into American life.

As this ESOL teacher describes, the data provide evidence of career and academic success of study abroad alumni.

When asked if participants received any specific orientation prior to departure, 80% of participants responded they did indeed receive orientation, while 20% did not receive any time of preparation or orientation before studying abroad. Eleven of the participants studied abroad in English speaking countries such as England, Australia, United States, Ireland, Wales, and Belize. One participant even remarked that he/she did not have any desire to learn the language and made no attempt. When participants were asked if they still think about their experiences today, over 90% of the participants responded that they do frequently. Three of the participants married spouses from the country where they studied abroad. Two participants responded that they do not think about this experience today or that they think about it infrequently. Two participants chose not to answer this question.

Participants were asked what their greatest take away was from their experience and was there anything they would change if they had to do it over again. Common responses to this answer were that students had an increased sense of diversity. They were able to learn about

themselves, push their boundaries, refine their interests, mature, improve their learning of a new language, and have a better understanding of third world countries and other education systems. The following responses support the identified themes of increased cultural awareness and appreciation for diversity and language:

Studying abroad allows you to obtain skills such as acceptance and adaptation, which are extremely important in so many aspects of life. I am not only mostly bilingual (trilingual now), I also feel that I "grew up" during that year.

This former student expresses an increased maturity while traveling abroad. This study abroad alumni now realizes the value of becoming multilingual and has developed an appreciation for diversity.

Only three participants felt that there was nothing they would change or do differently if they had the opportunity to repeat the experience. Participants commented that they did not spend enough time meeting local people and primarily hung out with their home country friends. They would travel with the people from their home universities, which hindered their ability to get to know the culture and language. Participants also wished they had spent more time attempting to speak the new language and getting involved in the local communities. Another common theme was that participants wished they had become fluent in the language of that country and would have forced themselves to try harder if they had this experience to repeat. Three participants felt they would stay for a shorter amount of time due to homesick feelings. One participant reported that this experience was hard emotionally. Two participants suggested they would stay with a host family versus at a university to be immersed in the culture more and forced to use the new language. One remarked that students should self-reflect prior to studying abroad to know what their goals, interests and desired outcomes will be after their experience. This would help prepare them to have an open mindset before starting their experience. The last survey question asked whether these former students have traveled internationally since their study abroad experiences. Only two of the participants commented that they had not traveled since their time studying abroad. Two participants did not respond to this question.

Over 90% of participants report having a positive experience during their study abroad experiences. The following response suggests that this participant experienced an improved international mindset, "I think about these international experiences every day...have opened my

eyes and knowledge of living and working with people of all races, cultures, languages, and religions.” Another participant reflected on how this experience influenced his future profession, “I think experiences like these (if done well) can add great value to those in the teaching profession and to all people for developing international mindedness.” These last two responses indicate how some participants now have an increased global mindset, “My perspective of the world changed for the better. I became more aware of different cultures and ways of life” and “I saw America from the perspective of non-Americans, which opened my eyes to how what we do and say affects the world.”

On the contrary, three participants reported having no desire to learn the language, a minimal interaction with the new culture and language, isolation while studying in a different country, and interaction and socialization only with peers from their home country. One respondent said “I was simultaneously homesick, lonely, and excited. This was before the internet. I called home just one time in the six months I was there.” Another respondent reported “It was hard emotionally I wish I had gone with a best friend or waited till I was a little older and not felt so out of it.” For this group of participants, it is indicated that this experience did not improve their international mindedness or intercultural competence. The following responses support a negative theme that emerged through this analysis. These excerpts show that some students have negative experiences during their time studying abroad.

LIMITATIONS

This study would be strengthened if there were a larger group of participants, thus providing a larger sample size. The age range of this study was primarily alumni who were several years removed from their study abroad experiences. It would have been desirable if a larger number of the participants had graduated from their universities more recently, so that their accounts were more representative of what today’s study abroad students are experiencing.

DISCUSSION

Many colleges and universities now realize that it is good educational practice to get their students to learn about the relations between nations, global issues, and intercultural relationships (Tate, 2012). It is important for today’s university graduates to be culturally literate (Heyward,

2002). A school's choice of curriculum, learning opportunities, and teaching approaches play a huge part in how students succeed in a global environment and have a sense of cultural literacy (Tate, 2012).

Results of this study suggest that study abroad programs are beneficial and influential on the lives of students. Over 90% of students reported having a positive experience and still think about their travel abroad today. It would also suggest that the study abroad experience does make a difference on students' professional identities. Following study abroad experiences some students expressed that they finally found their true selves and that after this experience they have a new perspective on life and have become better people. These experiences align with the literature which also indicates that study abroad can lead to personality changes, becoming more social, motivated, confident, as well as gaining perspective on career paths (Raby et al., 2014). The data shows that experiences abroad influenced students in their academic and future career paths. This is evident since approximately 50% of respondents reported that they chose a certain job, moved, pursued graduate or advanced studies following their study abroad experiences. There have been links to the future careers of students, job development, salary, and the likelihood of international employment. Study abroad participants have been known to gain interpersonal skills required for the workforce, which makes them more marketable for the global marketplace (Kronholz & Osborn, 2016).

The participant responses indicate that their study abroad experiences played a significant role in the formation of their personal identities, cultural awareness, and international mindedness. Study abroad experiences help students develop an international mindedness that will allow them to engage in a highly diverse society and enter the nation's workforce with a global mentality that helps them respect national identities and cultural differences (Tate, 2012). Over 90% of students reported having a positive experience that made them more confident, open-minded, independent, adventurous, more willing to take risks, increased empathy, patience, and some reported they came home with a global perspective.

Overall students had an increased sense of diversity. They were able to learn about themselves, push their boundaries, refine their interests, mature, improve their learning of a new language, and have a better understanding of third world countries and other education systems. Study abroad programs at the higher education level were originally established as an important

component of undergraduate students' learning and cultural awareness. These programs are known to enhance students' awareness of racial, ethnic, and diverse populations in addition to their academic development (Drexler & Campbell, 2011). This study supports the literature because 90% of respondents wrote that they now have a greater appreciation of culture, patience and empathy for other cultures, appreciation of diversity, language, and self-growth. The personal changes the students experienced indicate that their study abroad experiences gave them a greater sense of cultural awareness and international mindedness.

IMPLICATIONS

Future studies are needed to explore how many study abroad programs include some type of orientation programming and what do these orientation programs entail. Some former students had positive experiences and some students felt more isolated and homesick. It is possible that some orientation programs are stronger than others. A future study in this area might also facilitate universities in implementing a study abroad orientation program if they do not currently have one. A study of this sort should also have students reflect on their goals and desired outcomes from their upcoming study abroad experiences may help the students start their travels with more of an open mind to mix with locals, allowing them to get to know the culture and language quicker, thus making their experiences more enjoyable.

Some of the survey responses indicated that students were not prepared to travel abroad, some had no orientation, and some of the study abroad programs were not run well. There is a need to conduct further research on study abroad experiences to determine how to prevent negative student experiences. A logical next step might be to learn more about the different orientations at various universities and find out what works and what does not. The opportunity for study abroad experiences at the university level are invaluable and need to continue to grow so students have the opportunity to increase their awareness and perceptions of the world, diversity, and culture.

Also, it is worth digging deeper into the negative experiences of some students to determine some ways to help those students avoid such culture shock, homesick feelings, emotional stress, and struggles with the new language and culture. Students may need more advance preparation or support from their universities while they are studying abroad. Another

thing worth exploring is the amount of contact these former students had with their families. Universities could potentially work harder to ensure that students studying abroad have time to check in with their families through certain technologies such as Skype. It would also be essential that these universities also properly train study abroad students on how to use technology such as Skype during their orientation programs.

CONCLUSION

Globalization is a powerful and emergent influence on education and educational policies and is influencing teaching practices and teacher education at all educational levels (Wang et al., 2011). To be competitive in the global arena, students need to develop communicative competence, new skills, values, and a willingness to understand different cultures (Longview Foundation, 2008). Both the literature and results from study indicate that study abroad experiences can help students develop an international mindedness that will allow them to engage in a highly diverse society and enter the nation's workforce with a global mentality that helps them respect national identities and cultural differences (Tate, 2012). University study abroad programs are critical experiences for university students. These programs should remain a focus in research so that they continue to improve and support future students in being competitive in today's global arena.

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APPENDIX

Study Abroad Survey Questions

1. Please provide a brief description of your study abroad program/experience and its length.
2. Did you receive any specific orientation prior to departure?
3. Was this international experience in an English-speaking country? Was it in a country whose language is other than English but which you spoke or in which you were seeking language proficiency? Please provide a brief explanation.
4. Do you believe that your international study experience may have influenced you in any way? If yes, please explain or list the ways in which you were influenced.
5. Do you still think about this international experience today? If so, what are some things that

come to mind?

6. What would you say was your greatest “take away” from this international experience? Is there anything you would do over again? For example, would you do your experience the same way or differently?
7. Finally, have you traveled to this location or others since that time?