

Benefits of Study Abroad Programs for College Students

Krislyn Adle



Introduction

While in college, students have an array of opportunities within study abroad programs which allow for educational and personal growth. Studying abroad is a term given to a program which allows students to further their academic studies in a foreign country while attending a foreign university. These programs allow college students to earn credit towards their academic discipline and can last anywhere from a few weeks during a semester up to an entire school year. A great deal of research has explored the undeniably positive attributes that students gain during their time studying abroad, but more research on the cognitive benefits of study abroad is needed (Lee et al., 2012). Although there is limited recorded research surrounding how individuals are cognitively impacted by such programs, other areas of research have focused on levels of academic achievement, intercultural competencies, and the student's personal development.

Lee et al. (2012) notes from the United States Census Bureau that approximately 30 percent of the United States' population includes ethnic minorities. As this population increases, so does the ethnically and culturally diverse groups in America's educational system. Because of this important statistic, "developing students' awareness and understanding of different worldviews is of significant importance in order to prepare them with the knowledge and skills to meet the demands of today's globally connected world" (Lee et al., 2012). Becoming knowledgeable in cultural norms is an advantage especially when it comes to students preparing for their future and searching for a career because they are able to understand different perspectives. Many students around the globe are able to utilize study abroad programs which will prepare them for the future by benefiting their education as well as personal growth.

Education

Research has shown that college students who choose to study abroad receive a more well-rounded education when compared to students who do not study abroad. The number of students participating in study abroad programs has declined, but Stebleton et al. (2013) note the numbers are ticking up again. A large-scale survey conducted by Dwyer and Peters (2004) collected data from over 3,400 student respondents. This study did not consider factors such as the location where the student studied or the amount of time that the student spent there. The researcher's study has shown that 87 percent of respondent students said that participating in study abroad influenced subsequent educational experiences. 63 percent said that their program influenced their decision to expand or change academic majors, and 64 percent of the students reported to the researchers that the program they attended influenced them to attend graduate school. These astonishing segments of research reinforce the positive impact of study abroad programs because in all three of the discussed survey questions, over 60 percent of students answered in a positive fashion. This extensive survey that extended to thousands of individuals is credible in its research regarding the experience of studying abroad. Furthermore, it shapes students' perspectives on their future plans and adjustments made to their higher education goals.

Similarly, a survey questionnaire was sent out to students who applied for a study abroad program at the New Jersey State Consortium for International Studies. This survey was sent online through email to 200 students from The College of New Jersey and 36 students from Rowan University for a total of 236 participants. The purpose of this survey questionnaire was to measure "...several variables: the intrinsic value of education, global-mindedness, reverse culture shock, independence and international mobility" (Hadis, 2004, p. 60). The study was also concerned with the experiences the participants went through and how they impacted the student

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immediately upon their return to the United States. For example, Hadis (2004) included a question to students which asked if after returning from studying abroad, the student found themselves studying more for the ‘pleasure of knowing’ than to get a good grade (p. 63). The majority of the student respondents, at 53.2 percent, expressed a response of agreement or “very much” in agreement with the question. 28.9 percent of students declared themselves neutral in response, and 18.1 percent of students declared themselves in disagreement or “very much” in disagreement. The analysis of the results from this specific question clearly resulted in over half of students agreeing that upon their return from a study abroad program their focus was not on receiving a high letter grade. Students still had a high priority of academic focus, but they were more focused on simply retaining information. This questionnaire data not only positively reinforces the notion that studying abroad positively benefits a college students’ education, but supports the idea that grades aren’t the most influential factor when receiving a higher education.

Intercultural Development

In the same questionnaire issued by Benjamin Hadis, the improvement of intercultural awareness among the students was noted. For example, Hadis (2004) measured the students’ mean average on a scale of one (low) and five (high) when asked about their degree of interest in international news. Before studying abroad, the mean average was 3.74. The mean jumped to 4.22 when the respondents were asked the same question at the present time, or upon returning from their study abroad program (Hadis, 2004, p. 61). In similar fashion, 90.3 percent of the participants were “in agreement” or “very much in agreement” with the statement “The experience of studying abroad has deepened my interest in world affairs” (Hadis, 2004, p. 61).

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Clearly, this significant piece of data supports how studying abroad heightens a student's sense of global-mindedness and awareness.

Mary Dwyer and Courtney Peters (2004) included questions regarding 3,400 student responses in a segment of intercultural development in an extensive survey. The results of this survey ensure that the mission of studying abroad, which is to endorse open mindedness and to expose students to a once-in-a-lifetime experience that will benefit their understanding of what it's like to study and live in a foreign country. Of the 3,400 students that responded to the survey, a shocking 98 percent agreed that it helped them identify their own biases and values. There were 82 percent who replied that their study abroad program contributed to developing a more sophisticated way of looking at the world (Dwyer & Peters, 2004, p. 56). Also, 90 percent of the students said the experience influenced them to seek out a greater diversity of friends, and 64 percent of students acknowledged that studying abroad influenced them to explore different cultures than the one they were impacted by (Dwyer & Peters, 2004, p. 56). The results of this large-scale survey indicate that when college students study abroad they obtain a diverse, long-lasting group of friends who help to increase their knowledge on the norms and values in the country in which they study.

Personal Growth

Furthermore, there is much available information on the impact of study abroad programs and how an individual develops during this time. Dwyer and Peters (2004) reported additional information regarding college students' opinions of how they personally developed. For example, "97 percent said studying abroad served as a catalyst for increased maturity, 96 percent reported increased self-confidence, and 89 percent said that it enabled them to tolerate

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ambiguity” (Dwyer & Peters, 2004, p. 56). Since a vast majority of participants agree that spending time in a foreign country allowed them to mature and impacted their self-confidence is outstanding information which contributes to the idea that studying abroad contributes to a period of rapid personal development.

A similar trait of maturity and self-confidence is independence. Students who live with host families while studying abroad aren't able to receive direct support and guidance from their parents and friends because of the distance between them. As a result, the student must learn to take responsibility for their actions and decisions. Hadis' (2004) questionnaire included the statement “The experience of studying abroad has taught me how to make my own decisions” (Hadis, 2004, p. 62). 79.6 percent of college students were “in agreement” or “very much in agreement” with this statement. The analysis of each segment of data in this section proves that almost all students who study abroad gain a sense of maturity and independence which they bring back to their home country. These skills are imperative for the growth of a young adult and are certainly beneficial.

Conclusion

Study abroad programs introduce college students to the experience of furthering their studies in a foreign country. Although problems can arise such as language barriers and misunderstandings of cultural norms and values, the lifetime benefits outweigh any of these issues. A great deal of research shows that upon returning from studying abroad, college students are highly dedicated to their academic disciplines and learning in general. An increase in comprehension of global-mindedness and open-mindedness, independence and maturity, among other traits, positively correspond with how these young minds are enhanced. The wide range of

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available studies on how study abroad programs positively benefit college students continue to reveal new information that is imperative to understanding holistic changes that take place in the individual and the importance of the programs themselves.

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