

Chapter 1

Research on US Education Abroad: A Concise Overview

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides a concise overview of research in the area of United States (US) education abroad, beginning with a brief discussion of the changing role of US Higher Education (HE) and the ever-increasing momentum toward assessing and documenting outcomes. This is followed by a brief overview of the major trends in contemporary education abroad research in the US, with particular emphasis on research in short-term programming, and an assessment of the major methodological and design challenges. Because of their importance to education abroad and HE research, brief attention is given to the major theoretical models that have traditionally informed education abroad research in the US and the conceptual frameworks from related disciplines that may further extend education abroad research. Commonly used instruments are discussed in context of measuring outcomes. Some notable gaps in the existing research and needed directions are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Higher Education (HE) in the United States (US) is increasingly being challenged to justify its value and quality to a variety of stakeholders, from families paying tuition, university administrators setting policies, to federal and state legislators determining budgets. Pressure on HE providers to furnish convincing evidence that demonstrates that students are gaining essential knowledge and skills from their time spent in college has grown over time. As a result, HE Institutions (HEIs) have begun to direct more attention to documenting practices that effectively maximize student learning. With this increasing attention to assessing student learning has come growing interest in understanding and documenting what students

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0169-5.ch001

learn through education abroad programming (Bolen, 2007; Gray, Murdock, & Stebbins, 2002; Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009; Steinberg, 2007; Talburt & Stewart, 1999). US education abroad enrollments have steadily increased since the mid-1990s, from under 100,000 in 1996-1997 to over 280,000 in 2011-2012 (IIE, 2014).

As educators grapple with pressure(s) to accommodate this growth while striving to ensure quality, observers have become more vocal in their calls for less reliance on superficial program evaluations, mere tabulation of participation figures, or anecdotal accounts as ‘evidence’ for meaningful education abroad. Rather, key stakeholders are calling for more rigorous program assessment and deeper research that will provide a clearer understanding of the totality of the education abroad experience (Bolen, 2007; Engle & Engle, 2003; Poole & Davis, 2006; McLeod & Wainright, 2009; Stearns, 2009; Stimpfel & Engberg, 1997; Teagle Foundation, 2006). In this environment of greater accountability, it is no longer enough to claim that education abroad is a good thing for students without offering specific evidence to support such assertions (Gray, Murdock, & Stebbins, 2002; Grünzweig & Rinehart, 2002; Hoffa & DePaul, 2010).

Education abroad professionals are thus being asked with greater frequency to supply evidence of student learning. In recent years, however, there have been little outcomes assessment research beyond a smattering of studies looking at language proficiency and changes in attitudes and career goals (Kraft, Ballantine, & Garvey, 1994). Like others in HE, international educators need to justify the value of their efforts, but have been hindered by the general lack of valid and reliable data needed to respond to the rising barrage of questions. Research specifically focused on education abroad began to emerge during the 1950s, but it was not until the end of the 1970s that a respectable literature base and focus began to form (Chao, 2001; Comp, 2005; Weaver, 1989). During the 1970s, 189 research studies were published and the number increased to 675 by the 1990s. In the current decade, the number of published studies will likely exceed 1,000 (Comp et al., 2007; Vande Berg, Paige, & Lou, 2012).

Due to a strong undercurrent in the 1990s within the professional education abroad community calling for expanded research on student learning and clearer standards of best practice, a small group of education abroad professionals began to put into place the basic foundation for what would become The Forum on Education Abroad (Whalen, 2012). Officially founded in 2001, the Forum on Education Abroad has since launched a series of initiatives to support research in education abroad, including publishing the *Guide to Outcomes Assessment in Education Abroad*, an edited volume of tools for conducting outcomes assessment as a part of education abroad programming (Bolen, 2007). The publication is now widely regarded as an essential resource for institutions and organizations striving to meet the challenges of initiating and sustaining an outcomes assessment strategy for education abroad. The Association of International Education Administrators (AIEA) and NAFSA: Association of International Educators have also joined in this effort by identifying emerging research priorities and engaging international educators and scholars alike in knowledge development and dissemination (Deardorff, 2009).

Over the years, the sophistication and complexity of education abroad research has grown considerably (Bolen, 2007; Dolby, 2008; Lewin, 2009; Vande Berg, Paige, Lou, 2012; Twombly et al, 2012; Comp, 2016; Heyl, 2016). By now much of that research is built on the foundation of established theoretical frameworks and rigorous methodology and published in leading, highly ranked journals. Annual conferences hosted by the main professional and academic organizations now also include greater numbers of panels and workshops offering critical analysis of diverse issues and vexing challenges in the field. Papers presented at these conferences—including the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES), the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the Association for the Study

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