

Chapter 4

Repositioning Study Abroad as a Rite of Passage: Impact, Implications, and Implementation

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ABSTRACT

Study abroad can be an exhilarating and transformative experience literally moving students to a place where globalization, internationalization, and cultural awareness are direct experiences, not simply classroom abstractions. Study abroad provides multiple social and learning benefits for students, but in addition it also adds to the vibrancy of their colleges. However, despite these benefits, study abroad still remains a missed opportunity for most US student and their institutions. This chapter advocates that study abroad should be recognized and celebrated as an important rite of passage in undergraduate life. Thus reconceptualized, students might place renewed value on the study abroad experience and colleges might be able to promote such initiatives more effectively. The chapter explores the dynamics of rites of passage, the urgent need for significant rites of passage in undergraduate life, and how study abroad experiences can be strategically repositioned to benefit both students and their colleges.

INTRODUCTION

In considering the impact of study abroad on the self-efficacy of participants, Millstein (2005) notes that many students ‘describe a transformation in their very sense of self, both in how they experience their own cultures and in how they view their life paths.... an increased sense of empowerment, an enriched sense of belief in their own capabilities’ (p. 218). Likewise, after an extensive study of the study abroad experience, Salisbury (2011) concluded that ‘studying abroad significantly affects the positive development of intercultural competence’ and that this positive development was noticeable for all study abroad participants irrespective of ‘gender, race, SES [socio-economic status], institutional type, pre-college tested academic preparation, pretest score, or college experiences’ (p. 92).

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Those who have themselves studied abroad are among the first to acknowledge their increased ‘acceptance of difference in others, tolerance of ambiguity, self-awareness, confidence in meeting new people, and greater independence and self-confidence’ (American Institute for Foreign Study, 2013, p. 13). Study abroad participants also acknowledge that they have been helped to ‘develop several important employment-related skills (e.g., intercultural competence, global awareness, foreign language skills) to which they may have been less exposed [on domestic campuses]’ (Di Pietro, 2013, p. 18). These are the personal and student-based responses to study abroad, but there is also a national policy issue at stake. Considering the place of the United States in the global community, and the ability of its college graduates to compete at the international level, the Lincoln Commission (2005) emphasized that in a rapidly changing world ‘the graduates who prosper... will be those who leave school with an appreciation of global issues and cultures and an introduction to the new ways of the world’ (p. 6). It is clear that study abroad presents exceptionally positive benefits and significant transformative possibilities for students, their institutions of learning, and indeed for their countries; nevertheless, study abroad is not unproblematic.

This chapter reconsiders study abroad from a different perspective, a perspective that centers on its transformative impact on those involved. In part, the chapter is based on the present author’s experience with international initiatives within the context of US Higher Education (HE). The first section provides background by considering the contemporary conceptualization of study abroad with a focus on the US. To provide international readers with a frame of reference, this section includes a brief overview of the HE context in the US and further explores the benefits of study abroad.

The second section considers the voids, spaces, and gaps that exist in undergraduate education, especially for those who are studying business administration. It explores efforts to make sense of these lacunae and suggests that the study abroad experience can provide an important way of filling them and of being recognized as legitimate rite of passage by undergraduates. It also advocates that study abroad should be repositioned – away from a pleasant but peripheral event in the student’s life, to one that is recognized and valued as an authentic ‘coming of age’ experience. Recommendations and suggestions for institutional policies and educational practice are also provided.

The third section considers research initiatives that might further our understanding of study abroad and of how such experiences connect to higher status and social standing for students. The final section summarizes the key issues presented in the chapter and draws together several conclusions that will hopefully be of value to the reader and which may promote richer, more valued, and more meaningful studies abroad experiences in the future.

THE INCIDENCE AND VALUE OF STUDY ABROAD

Institutions of Higher Education (HEIs) and national governments both place significant value on study abroad experiences, albeit for different reasons. The college community sees the advantage in terms of educational gains for students and faculty, the development of intercultural competency, and the furtherance of institutional internationalization. Most national governments recognize the value of study abroad in terms of increasing competitive advantage in international markets and of contributing to a more globally attuned labor force. These HE and governmental perspectives are in fact complementary, a point that has been appreciated by many policy makers, particularly in the European Union and in Australia.

In the EU, study abroad and increased international student mobility – most conspicuously in the form of the *Erasmus Program* – are seen as benefitting not only participants, but their institutions and

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