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Student Perceptions on the Benefits and Barriers to Study Abroad

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Student Perceptions on the Benefits and Barriers to Study Abroad

Abstract

This study examines perceptions of the benefits and barriers to study abroad amongst undergraduate students studying at the Soltis Center for Research and Education in Costa Rica, in 2018 and 2019. A total of 49 students representing five different study abroad programs from three institutions participated in the study. Cost, personal obligations, and timing of the program were identified by all respondents as the most important barriers to student participation in a study abroad program. Results of a Q-sort suggests that perceived benefits varied by academic year of the student and their experience with study abroad, and other high impact learning experiences. Upper-year students, as well as those with previous travel experience, viewed study abroad as an opportunity to develop career-relevant skills, while lower-year students and those with less travel experience perceived broadening horizons and personal growth as the most important benefits. The transition in perceived benefits can be used to effectively structure study abroad within the undergraduate curriculum to maximize benefits for student learning.

Cette étude examine les perceptions des avantages et des obstacles à étudier à l'étranger parmi les étudiants et les étudiantes de premier cycle qui ont étudié au Centre Soltis de recherche et d'éducation au Costa Rica en 2018 et 2019. Un total de 49 étudiants et étudiantes représentant cinq programmes différents d'études à l'étranger de trois établissements ont participé à cette étude. Les coûts, les obligations personnelles et le calendrier du programme ont été identifiés par tous les répondants et toutes les répondantes comme étant les obstacles les plus importants à la participation des étudiants et des étudiantes dans un programme d'études à l'étranger. Les résultats d'un test Q-sort suggèrent que les avantages perçus varient selon l'année universitaire des étudiants et des étudiantes ainsi que selon leur expérience avec les études à l'étranger, ainsi que d'autres expériences d'apprentissage à fort impact. Les étudiants et les étudiantes d'année supérieure, ainsi que ceux et celles qui avaient déjà voyagé auparavant, ont considéré les études à l'étranger comme une opportunité de développer des compétences pertinentes pour leur carrière, alors que les étudiants et les étudiantes de première année et ceux et celles qui avaient peu voyagé auparavant ont considéré que les avantages les plus importants étaient l'élargissement de leurs horizons et leur croissance personnelle. La transition des avantages perçus peut être utilisée pour structurer de façon efficace les études à l'étranger au sein d'un programme d'études de premier cycle afin de maximiser les avantages pour l'apprentissage des étudiants et des étudiantes.

Keywords

study abroad, Costa Rica, cultural awareness, career-relevant skills; études à l'étranger, Costa Rica, sensibilisation culturelle, compétences pertinentes à la carrière

Experiential learning is an important way for students to acquire knowledge through observation, experience, and reflection. Study abroad is a method used to increase student learning, develop skills and global competence through observation, and direct experience with a new culture and environment (Clark, 1996). As defined by Kitsantas (2004), study abroad includes “all educational programs that take place outside the geographical boundaries of the country of origin” (pg. 441). Using this definition, ‘study abroad’ includes short-term faculty-led programs for credit, service learning and alternative spring break programs, and semester-long exchanges (Sachau, Brahsler & Fee, 2010). Regardless of the duration and focus, study abroad programs provide students with an opportunity to develop a global perspective and are increasingly part of the undergraduate experience. The need to increase the number and diversity of study abroad programs is driven in part by the increasing cultural diversity in the United States and Canada (Ismail, Morgan & Hayes, 2006), and a globalization of markets that requires students to work with people from a diversity of backgrounds (Albers-Miller, Prenshaw & Staughan, 1999; Jones, 2003; Ortiz, 2004; Brux & Fry, 2010; Witkowsky & Mendez, 2018).

A review of studies by Clarke et al. (2009) suggests that business students return from study abroad programs with greater intercultural proficiency, increased openness to cultural diversity, and are more globally minded compared to their peers who did not study abroad. This supports other studies that argue that students develop an expanded vision of the world and are more tolerant of different ideas after being abroad (Douglas & Jones-Rikkers, 2001; Anderson et al., 2006; Pence & MacGillivray, 2008; Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Cisneros-Donahue et al., 2012; Klein & Wikan, 2019). Teaching intercultural proficiency can be difficult in the traditional classroom (Munoz, Wood & Cherrier, 2006; Feng, 2016), which previously led Schuster et al. (1998) to argue that “one really needs to visit a country to understand it” (pg. 130). The experience can spark a student’s interest in working in a foreign country (Orahood, Kruze & Pearson, 2004; Butcher, Wiedenhoft & Loynachan, 2017; Jon, Shin & Fry, 2020), participating in another study abroad program (Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005), interest and proficiency in foreign languages (Lewin, 2009; Magnan & Back, 2007; Vande Berg, 2009; Crossman, & Clark, 2010; Franklin, 2010; Potts, 2015), and confidence in their studies through engagement and new social networks (Houser et al., 2011). Cisneros-Donahue et al. (2012) also found that students who participated in a study abroad program showed statistically significant gains in functional knowledge (in their field of study) compared to a control group who did not study abroad in addition to gains in world geography, global interdependence, interpersonal accommodation, and cultural sensitivity. Similarly, Dwyer and Peters (2004) found that students returning from a study abroad self-reported gains in personal development, academic commitment, intercultural development, and career development.

It is generally assumed that the purpose of studying abroad is to develop intercultural proficiency through a focus on, or complete immersion in, the culture of the host country. However, there are faculty-led study abroad programs that focus on the natural environment of the host country, with varying degrees of cultural interaction and exchange (e.g., Houser, Lemmons & Cahill, 2013; Houser, Cahill & Lemmons, 2014). In these programs, the study abroad is used to extend classroom learning and explore a topic or phenomenon not possible in the country of origin. Because focus is not placed on the local culture, and there is a tendency to use English in these and other short-term study abroad programs in non-English speaking countries, cross-cultural learning opportunities are typically limited (Kramsch, 1993; Hamad & Lee, 2013; Chwialkowska, 2020). Although Molinsky and Perunovic (2008) argue that in programs with little to no language skills, students are less likely to understand how to interact within and understand the host culture,

it is still possible that study abroad programs can provide students with a global perspective and greater intercultural awareness if they are designed accordingly. As suggested by Lewis & Niesenbaum (2005) these programs should include community-based research, service learning, and an emphasis on research skills and interdisciplinarity for students to gain similar (cultural) benefits to those who participate in long-term programs abroad. Similarly, Lemmons (2015) suggests that pre-trip and while-abroad activities can be administered to enhance cultural gains during short study abroad programs, including programs not primarily focused on culture.

While it is recognized that students benefit in various ways from their participation in a study abroad program, there are several barriers to study abroad that preclude student participation including financial constraints (Curry, 1999; Gordon, Patterson & Cherry, 2014), fear (Szekely & Krane, 1997; Gordon, Patterson & Cherry, 2014), personal constraints and obligations (Dooley, Dooley & Carranza, 2008; Hackney, Boggs & Borozan, 2012; Gordon, Patterson & Cherry, 2014), lack of knowledge about study abroad opportunities and limited support by the institution (Trilokekar & Rasmi, 2011), limited knowledge of available programs and relevance (Naffziger, Bott & Mueller, 2008), length of time away from school, work and family (Albers-Miller, Prenshaw & Staughan, 1999; Kim & Goldstein 2005; Vernon, Moos & Loncarich, 2017), and lack of fit within the academic program or major (Doyle et al., 2010). The latter is a particular problem for science and pre-health professional studies in which the curriculum is hierarchical, and electives are limited (Daly & Barker 2005; Kim & Goldstein, 2005; Zimitat 2008; Bai, Larimer & Riner, 2016). Similarly, Stroud (2010) found that planning to pursue a master's degree or higher, living with family while attending school, and majoring in engineering and professional areas negatively affect intent to study abroad. Similarly, Trilokekar and Rasmi, S. (2011) support the idea that inflexible and heavy curriculum requirements can limit student interest in study abroad, in addition to the barriers of cost, limited knowledge of study abroad opportunities and benefits, and inadequate institutional support services specific to Canadian students studying abroad.

While the potential benefits of study abroad have been reported in several studies, to much of our understanding it is based on surveys completed using Likert scales. The problem with a Likert scale survey, such as the one completed by Dwyer and Peters (2004), is that there tends to be statistically significant inter-item consistency. This means that students tend to rate each item based on their overall perception of the program and do not consider each item individually. There is also a tendency for simple descriptions of Likert surveys to focus on the majority response as representative of the population from which the sample was drawn. If the perceived benefit of studying abroad varies amongst students, it is possible that the design and focus of a program may limit the realization of those benefits. Understanding student perceptions and expectations of study abroad can be used to help design programs and ensure that they are marketed and supported appropriately. In this study, a Q-sort approach is used to examine student perceptions of the benefits and barriers to study abroad amongst students from 5 different programs from 3 different North American institutions that used the Soltis Center for Research and Education (herein referred to as Soltis Center) in Costa Rica at some point during their time abroad. Unlike Likert scale surveys, the mixed-method non-parametric Q-sort requires that students sort perceived outcomes from most important to least important, which helps to reveal the variability in student responses and to identify what may influence their perceptions.

Study Site and Programs

The Soltis Center is in San Juan de San Isidro de Peñas Blancas, about a 2.5-h drive northwest of San José, the capital city of Costa Rica. Donated to Texas A&M University (TAMU) by a former student, the mission of the Soltis Center is to support high-impact academic, research, and outreach programs in Costa Rica and throughout Central America. Opened in 2009, the facility provides dormitories, classrooms, and computer labs to support research, education, and outreach activities.

A total of 49 students were surveyed across the five programs from three institutions who used the Soltis Center in 2018 or 2019 at a time that overlapped with the senior author. Each program examined in this study had a different focus on the cultural and physical environment around the Soltis Center and across the country, and each had a different combination of student participants. While a sample of convenience, a focus on students using the same field station allows for the potential impact of program focus (cultural or physical environment) and student characteristics on perceived benefits and barriers to study abroad to be explored. An overview of the programs is provided in Table 1.

Table 1.

Programs that used the Soltis Center in 2018 (A, B, C) and 2019 (D, E) that were surveyed in this study.

Program	Home Country	Program Focus	Days at Soltis Center and in Costa Rica	Sex	Academic Years
A	Canada	Rainforest Entomology	14/14 days	5 F/2 M	1 2 nd -year 1 3 rd -year 5 4 th -year
B	Canada	Rainforest Hydrology	14/14 days	7 F/2M	4 1 st -year 1 2 nd -year 1 3 rd -year 3 4 th -year
C	Canada	Community Service Learning	7/7 days	8 F/2 M	2 2 nd -year 8 3 rd -year
D	Canada	Natural Hazards	5/14 days	10 F/2 M	2 1 st -year 2 2 nd -year 4 3 rd -year 4 4 th -year
E	United States	Community Service Learning	14/14 days	12 F/5 M	12 1 st -year 4 2 nd -year 1 3 rd -year

Methodology

The study design was approved by the Research Ethics Board (REB) at the University of Windsor. A copy of the survey is provided in Appendix A and an outline of the question categories is provided in Table 2. The survey focused on previously published benefits and barriers to study abroad, with a focus on the benefits of study abroad presented by Dwyer and Peters (2004). While that study was published nearly 20 years ago, it is one of the most referenced papers outlining the benefits of study abroad, and for the purposes of the current study it is considered equivalent to the sum of the discourse published in the literature. Dwyer and Peters (2004) identified 11 benefits of study abroad across categories of personal development, academic commitment, intercultural development, and career development. All benefits identified by Dwyer and Peters (2004) were included in the survey.

Table 2

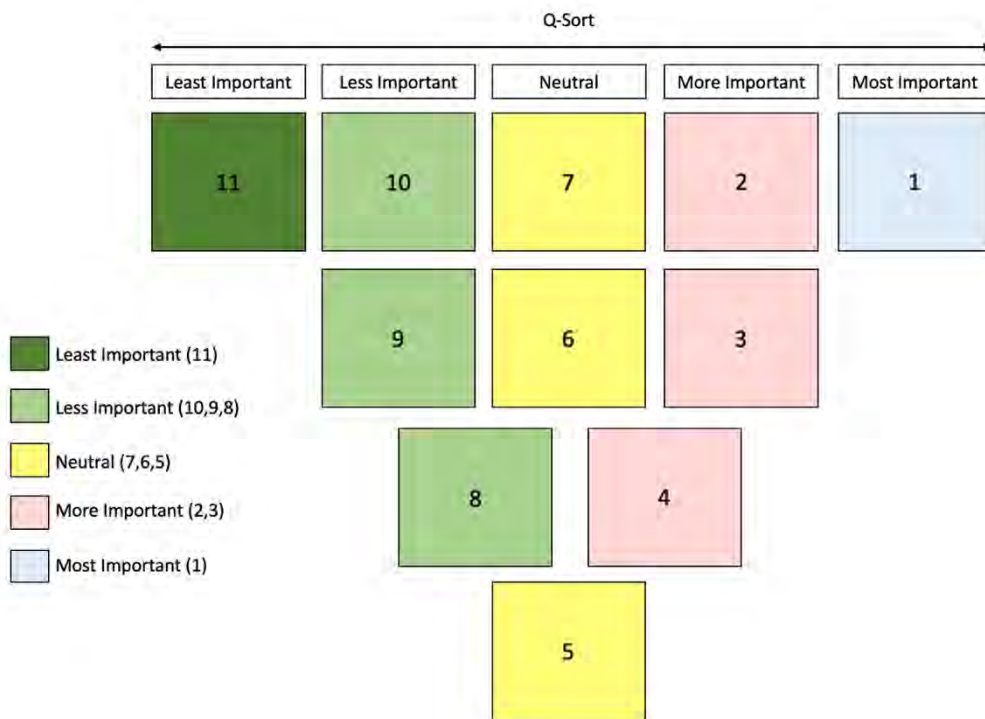
Question groups used to elicit responses from students

Group	Focus of Questions
1	Demographics- personal information, education level, sex
2	Previous Experience- traveling abroad, high impact learning experiences
3	Perceived benefits of a study abroad (from Dwyer and Peters, 2004)
4	Motivations for studying abroad
5	Influences on decision to participate in a study abroad program
6	Perceived Barriers to Study abroad

Rather than simply have the students rank each benefit of study abroad on a Likert scale, we asked the students to sort the outcomes from most important outcome to least important outcome for each group of questions following the Q-method (Brannstrom, 2011; Houser, Cahill, & Brannstrom, 2014). The analysis begins with the development of a “concourse” of statements made by protagonists in the area of study, which in the majority of studies involves the use of personal interviews supplemented by printed sources to develop statements that represent the “sum of the discourse” (Eden, Donaldson & Walker, 2005, p. 414), which, in this study, is considered to be the benefits identified by Dwyers and Peters (2004). The students were then asked to sort the statements to force respondents to compare statements simultaneously. Specifically, the sorting procedure required that the respondents place the statements into a grid that allowed for only one statement corresponding to “most important outcome” and only one for “least important outcome” (Figure 1). The range and distribution shape used for the sort are designed based on the number of items in the study, with the requirement being the need for a near-normal distribution that forces respondents to choose the most and least-important benefits and barriers of study abroad. Since the purpose of a Q-sort is to sample the range of perspectives (salient groupings in the population with similar perceptions), representativeness does not require many respondents from a population. While this does not permit a direct and statistical comparison based on individual characteristics (sex, year of study, program focus, etc.), it allows for respondents of similar viewpoints to be identified and described based on the combination of those characteristics.

Figure 1.

Structure of the Q-Sort Used by Students to Rank their Perceived Benefits of Participating in a Study Abroad.



Note. Based on the benefits identified by Dwyers and Peters (2004).

Following standard methods for the Q-method, the sorts were analyzed using a Q factor analysis, a statistical method to characterize the variability among observed variables that are correlated. Unlike traditional approaches to factor analysis that looks for correlations between variables, the Q factor analysis looks for correlations between respondents to reduce the individual viewpoints to a smaller number of factors representing respondents with similar viewpoints. In other words, the Q-methodology is an inverted approach to factor analysis in which the variables are the individual respondents, not their traits, which are used to interpret the factor loading results. Specifically, the Q factor analysis reduces the number of responses, described in terms of eigenvalues, and identify structure in student responses. Only those factors with an eigenvalue >1.0 were identified as statistically significant (Addams, 2000; Woolley & McGinnis, 2000) and subsequently Varimax rotated to maximize the sum of the variances of the squared loadings. Students will load onto the same factor if the analysis identifies them as like-minded individuals, whereas negative loadings indicate positions that are diametrically opposed (Pini, Previte & Haslam-McKenzie, 2007). In many studies employing Q-sort, a follow-up semi-structured interview with ‘loaders’ on the factors to help characterize the differences between groups (e.g., Brannstrom, 2011). This was not completed as part of this study due to the distributed nature of the students following their time at the Soltis Center and represents an important limitation of the study.

With the support of the study abroad instructors, the voluntary survey was administered to all students ($n=55$) participating in the overlapping programs in 2018 and 2019. Given that the respondents were participating in a study abroad at a time when the senior author was at the Soltis Center, it is important to recognize this as a sample of convenience and not necessarily representative of all students using the center or participating on a study abroad program. No incentives were used to promote student participation, and the survey was introduced and administered by the senior author at the last dinner before the students departed the center. Of the 55 students participating in the study abroad programs, only 49 completed the survey for a rejection rate of 11%.

Results

Student responses were initially examined with respect to self-reported sex (M/F/O), year of schooling, program focus (cultural or physical), and previous travel experience. Since students were required to sort responses into a normal distribution for the Q-sort with several ranks considered similar, direct statistical comparisons are not possible based on these characteristics. Only the most and least important responses are qualitatively examined.

Perception Based on Sex

Based on modal rankings to Q10, there were some differences were observed in the perceived benefits of study abroad by students who self-reported as male and female. Of the 11 benefits of study abroad, more male students ranked increased self-confidence and understand cultural values and biases as the most important benefit of participating in a study abroad (Ranks 1 and 2 respectively) and ranked influence on their interest in their area of academic study or exploring foreign languages and cultures as least important ($R=10,11$). In contrast, female students ranked increase their interest in exploring foreign languages and cultures, and impact on their worldview as most important ($R=1,2$), but did not believe that the study abroad would influence their interest in further academic study or alter their career direction ($R=10,11$). In response to Q13, both male and female students tended to rank broadening horizons and experiencing other cultures as most important reasons for participating ($R=1,2$). No statistically significant differences in perceived barriers to study abroad (Q15) were observed between male and female students. While differences in ranking were noted, self-identified sex was not sufficiently strong to influence the factor scores of the Q-sort.

Academic Year

Based on the modal responses, differences were also observed in the perceived benefits of study abroad (Q8) based on the academic year of the student. Students in their first year tended to rank impact on worldview, and interest in studying and exploring foreign languages and cultures as the most important benefits of participating in a study abroad ($R=1,2$). Those same students ranked influence on future educational experiences, seek out a greater diversity of friends, acquire skills, and influence my career path as least important ($R=10,11$). Students in their final (senior) year ranked interest in academic study, and influence on educational experiences as the most important benefits ($R=1,2$). Senior students ranked understanding cultural values and biases and altered career direction as the least important benefits of participating on a study abroad ($R=10,11$).

No differences in perceived motivations (Q13) and barriers (Q15) were observed with respect to the academic year of the student.

Program Focus

As previously noted, the focus of the programs examined in this study was divided into cultural (Programs C and E) and strictly physical (Programs A, B and D) with the support of the study abroad instructor (see Table 1). Students in the culturally focused programs ranked increased self-confidence significantly more important compared to those students in the physically focused programs. Culturally focused students ranked interest in academic study and acquisition of career-relevant skills as significantly less important compared to the students in the physically focused students. No statistically significant differences in perceived motivations (Q13) and barriers (Q15) were observed between groups.

Previous Experience

No differences in perceived benefits (Q10) motivations (Q13), and barriers (Q15) were observed between previous experience categories.

Q-Sort of Student Perceptions

The results described in the previous sections suggest that, with few exceptions, student perceptions do not significantly vary based solely on demographics, previous travel experience, or program focus alone. A Q method approach to student perceptions does not require influencing variables be decided and used to split the data *a priori*. Rather it allows for the collective and potentially confounding influence of these variables on student perceptions about study abroad to be identified. A Q-sort on perceived benefits (Q10) revealed 4 statistically significant factors that account for 76% of the variance (Table 3). The rank statement score for each factor is provided in Table 4. Most important benefits are dark shaded and least important are light shaded.

Table 3.

Characteristics of the Four Statistically Significant Factors (F1-F4) Extracted.

	F1	F2	F3	F4
Eigenvalue	18.3	8.0	7.1	4.2
% Variance explained	37	16	14	9
# of students	24	7	11	7

Table 4.*Rank Statement Scores for the Q-sort for Each of the Four Factors Identified.*

	F1	F2	F3	F4
Increased self confidence	4	3	-1	2
Increased maturity	3	1	0	-5
Enhanced worldview	5	-2	4	5
Enhanced interest in academic study	2	4	-2	4
Influence education experiences in the future	1	-5	1	-1
Commitment to studying foreign languages and cultures	0	-3	5	1
Understand cultural values and biases	-1	-4	3	-4
Seek out greater diversity of friends	-2	0	-4	-3
Influence interactions with other people	-3	-1	2	0
Develop career-relevant skills	-4	5	-3	3
Altered my career direction	-5	2	-5	-2

Note. The most important benefits (+4 and +5) are dark shaded, and the least important benefits (-5 and -4) are lightly shaded. Note that the Q analysis rescales the rankings from -5 to 5 from the original 1 to 11 used in the survey.

Factor 1 included 24 students and included most of the students in Program C as well as students from the other programs. Students in Factor 1 were predominantly in their 1st and 2nd years of study. These students ranked “lasting impact on my worldview” and “increased self-confidence” as the most important benefits of studying abroad. They ranked “develop career-relevant skills” and “altered career path” as the least important benefits of study abroad (Q8). These students also identified “broadening horizons” as the most important motivation, and “improved chances of getting a good job” as the least important motivation (Q16). Factor 1 students identified finances as the biggest barrier to study abroad (Q15) and ranked affordability as the most important influence on their participation in study abroad (Q7). Students in this group had the least participation in previous travel abroad personally or as a student, undergraduate research, internships and/or co-op and varsity sports (Table 5). Most of the students, however, previously participated in service learning or volunteering, and had taken a leadership role with a campus organization.

Table 5.*Participation of Students in Previous Travel Abroad and Other High Impact Learning Experiences with Respect to Factor (F1-F4)*

	Previous Travel	Study Abroad	Service Learning	Research	Internship	Leadership	Varsity Sports
F1	63%	17%	67%	29%	21%	58%	17%
F2	43%	43%	43%	29%	43%	71%	14%
F3	55%	9%	73%	45%	9%	64%	0%
F4	100%	0%	100%	29%	43%	86%	43%

Factor 2 students (n=7) included students from Programs A, B and D, with an average year of study of 3.3 (junior and senior), and the least amount of previous travel. These students identified “develop career-relevant skills” and “enhanced interest in academic study” as the most important benefit of study abroad (Q8), and “influence education experiences in the future” and

“understand cultural values and biases” as the least important benefits. These students identified “field experience not available at home institution” as the most important motivation, and “improved competence in foreign language” as the least important motivation for completing a study abroad. Like Factor 1 students, these students identified finances as the biggest barrier to study abroad (Q15), and program-relevance as the least important barrier. The quality of the program was identified as the most important influence on participating in the study abroad (Q7), and safety as the least important influence on their participation. Students in this group had the highest participation rate in a previous study abroad and an internship or co-op program. Most had taken a leadership role with a campus organization, and few had participated in varsity sports.

The 11 students represented by Factor 3 included students from Programs A, B, and D with an average year of study of 2.4 representing sophomore and junior students. These students ranked “enhanced worldview” and “commitment to studying foreign languages and cultures” as the most important benefits of studying abroad. The least important benefits identified by these students are “altered my career direction” and “seek out greater diversity of friends” as the least important benefits of study abroad. These students ranked “intellectual growth” as the most important motivation of study abroad (Q8), and “independence” as the least important benefit. Like Factor 1 and 2 students, these students also identified finances as the biggest barrier to study abroad (Q15), and “support from professors” as the least important barrier. Affordability of the program was ranked as the most important influence on participating in the study abroad (Q7), and safety as the least important influence on their participation. Students in this group had limited experience with a previous study abroad, internship or co-op program, and varsity sports, but most had previously participated in service learning or a volunteering experience and more than half had taken a leadership role with a campus organization. This group had the highest percentage of students who had previously participated in undergraduate research.

Factor 4 included (n=7) students from all programs and across all years of study with an average of 2.2 years of study. Almost all the students in this program had travelled previously and were the most well-travelled compared to the other students considered in this study. Interestingly, however, none of the students in this group previously travelled as part of a university study abroad program. These students identified “*enhanced worldview*” and “enhanced interest in academic study” as the most important benefits of studying abroad (Q8), and career-relevant skills and altered career direction as the least important benefits. The most important motivation for participating in the program was professional development (Q16), and the least important motivation for these students as enhanced self-awareness and understanding of their own culture. Finances were also identified as the biggest barrier to participating in study abroad (Q15), and not enough opportunities as the least important barrier. Students represented by this factor also identified affordability as the most important influence on their participation (Q7), and quality of the program as the least important influence. All these students had previously participated in service learning, and most had taken a leadership role with a campus organization.

Discussion

This study examines the perceived benefits, motivations, influences, and barriers to study abroad amongst students who completed a study abroad trip to the Soltis Center in Costa Rica in 2018 and 2019. Students participating in five study abroad programs hosted by three different institutions ranked the benefits, motivations, influences, and barriers to study abroad using a Q-sort method. Previous studies involving Likert scales, have revealed few differences amongst

students based on demographics, previous travel experience and program focus. This suggests that the use of a Likert scale is overly simplistic and does not account for the differences in how individual students perceive the benefits of study abroad. Use of a Q-sort reveals that the perceptions of the students do vary, and the small sample in this study can be described in terms of 4 statistically significant groups (or clusters) based on a combination of academic year and previous travel experience. The clustering of the students was independent of whether the students participated in a culturally or physically focused study abroad program. The result of this study provides new guidance on how to develop and market study abroad programs successfully to reflect the change in student knowledge, experience, and maturity over their undergraduate degree. While student perceptions and expectations should not dictate curriculum design, study abroad programs targeted at upper-year students should highlight specific career-relevant skills rather than just the opportunity to experience other cultures and broaden their worldview. The focus on career-relevant skills may be particularly important to first-generation students and those with limited resources who are unable to afford an adventure abroad (Whatley, 2017; Tillapaugh & McAuliffe, 2019; Netz et al., 2020). Not understanding the relevance of the program makes it difficult to afford the cost of the trip or the time away from school, work, and family (Albers-Miller, Prenshaw & Staughan, 1999; Green, 2005; Kim & Goldstein 2005; Vernon, Moos & Loncarich, 2017).

The largest difference in student perception was associated with the academic year of the student. Regardless of the program focus, students in lower years (Factor 1) tended to view study abroad as an opportunity to enhance their worldview and increased self-confidence, while students in the later years of their undergraduate (Factor 2) tended to view study abroad as an opportunity to develop career-relevant skills and to enhance interest in their academic study. The students in Factor 2 group viewed cultural values and biases and interactions with other people as the least important benefits, and the quality of the program as the most important influence. In other words, study abroad for senior students is an extension of the classroom to gain skills and experiences not available in the classroom and their home country (Houser, Chaill & Lemmons, 2014; McLaughlin et al., 2018; Brown et al., 2021). These students would also be the most constrained in terms of available electives to participate in study abroad and their participation needs to be directly relevant to what they have already learned and experienced in the classroom. In contrast, the students represented by Factor 1 had less participation in other high impact learning experiences (e.g., another study abroad, service learning, internship, etc.) and presumably had the greatest number of electives still available. For these students, participation in a study abroad is an opportunity to explore other cultures and environments. While the Factor 1 students in this study did not believe it would alter their career direction, results from Davis and Knight (2017) suggest that it may have an influence upon return to their home institutions.

For students in their 2nd (sophomore) and 3rd (junior) year of study, perceptions about study abroad depend in large part on previous travel experience. For those students who had limited previous travel experience (Factor 3), study abroad is about enhancing their worldview and increase their commitment to studying foreign cultures and languages. In contrast, Factor 4 students, who had previously travelled, view study abroad as an opportunity to enhance their worldview and influence their future education experiences. Factor 4 students also had previously participated in one or more high impact learning experiences, where Factor 3 students had limited previous participation in a high impact learning experience. While previous experience influences student perception of study abroad, further studies are required to determine which other high impact learning experience and personal experiences alone, and in combination, influence student perceptions.

The change in student perception of study abroad with year of study (Factor 1 vs. Factor 2), and previous experience (Factor 3 vs. Factor 4) suggests that study abroad experiences should have different designs and focuses across the undergraduate curriculum. Results of the study suggest that the design of study abroad experiences should recognize that more junior undergraduate students see study abroad as an opportunity to explore the culture and environment (Clarke et al., 2009; Cisneros-Donahue et al., 2012), support personal development and commitment to their degree (Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Adam et al., 2018), and confidence in their studies (Houser et al., 2011; Marvell et al., 2013; Johnston et al., 2014; Kim, 2021). Study abroad programs for more experienced students should recognize that these students are participating to develop specific skills and experiences that extend their classroom experience and are relevant to their future career. In this respect, the relatively limited marketing of study abroad programs as intercultural proficiency, openness to cultural diversity, and a global perspective may not be relevant to or resonate with those students. As argued by McKeown (2009) these assumed benefits of study abroad have limited assessments “because the act of studying abroad can be seen....as a success unto itself, a kind of media darling that needs no further scrutiny” (pg. 2). Study abroad should not be assumed to be simply a means to develop a global perspective and further assessment is required to determine how the focus, scale, and design of a program supports student learning and expectations. However, given that these results are based on a limited sample of convenience, further study is required.

A focus on intercultural proficiency, openness to cultural diversity, and a global perspective may also be a barrier to faculty who are interested in leading a study abroad program but are unable to provide a cultural experience for the students. An upper-year study abroad program focused on specific skills, or a particular feature of the culture or environment may be easier to develop for many instructors, particularly if it aligns with their research. Further study is needed to assess faculty perceptions about the benefits and barriers of study abroad programs for students and their own personal development.

Even if study abroad programs are designed and marketed to recognize the different perceptions and expectations of undergraduate students, there remains many barriers to participation for many students. Personal finances and program costs were identified by all students as the primary barrier to participation in study abroad, and most students identified affordability as the most important influence on their decision to participate. Only the students represented by Factor 2 identified program quality as the most important influence on their participation. In other words, those students who view study abroad as an extension of the classroom and are without financial barriers are less concerned about program cost if the program is viewed as an opportunity to develop career-relevant skills- a tangible outcome for the program. This suggests that program costs and the need for scholarships or fundraising can also be scaled across the undergraduate curriculum to ensure that affordability aligns to perceived benefits.

Conclusions

This study examines the perceived benefits and barriers to study abroad amongst students from 5 different programs across 3 different institutions who all used the same center in Costa Rica for part or all their time abroad. A Q-sort of perceived benefits reveals that academic year and previous experience influence student perceptions of both the barriers and benefits to study abroad. Senior (3rd or 4th year) students perceived the benefits of study abroad as an opportunity to develop career-relevant skills beyond the classroom, with program quality being the most important

influence on their participation. In contrast, lower-level (1st and 2nd year) students viewed study abroad as an opportunity to broaden their horizons and enhance their worldview. Similarly, those students with past travel experience and previous participation in one or more high impact learning experiences viewed study abroad as an opportunity to broaden their horizons and professional development. Those students with limited travel experience viewed study abroad as an opportunity to experience other cultures and broadening their horizons. While further study is required, results of this study suggest that perceived benefits and barriers to study abroad should be considered in the development and implementation of study abroad experiences throughout the undergraduate curriculum.

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Appendix

Survey

Q1 I have read the informed consent document above and agree to participate in this research. This checkbox serves as a digital signature.

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If “I have read the informed consent document above and agree to participate in this research”. This c... = No

Q2 Year of Study:

- Freshman (1st year) (1)
- Sophomore (2nd year) (2)
- Junior (3rd year) (3)
- Senior (4th year) (4)
- 5th year or greater (5)

Q3 Sex

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Other (3)
- Prefer not to report (4)

Q4 Is this your first experience travelling abroad?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Skip To: Q13 If “Is this your first experience travelling abroad?” = Yes

Q5 Where else have you travelled abroad?

Q6 Was your previous travel abroad for? Select all that apply.

Study (1)

Work (2)

Volunteer (3)

Leisure (4)

Other (Please specify) (5) _____

Q7 Rank the following in order of how they influence your whether or not to study abroad

_____ Affordability (1)

_____ Safety (2)

_____ Time Frame (3)

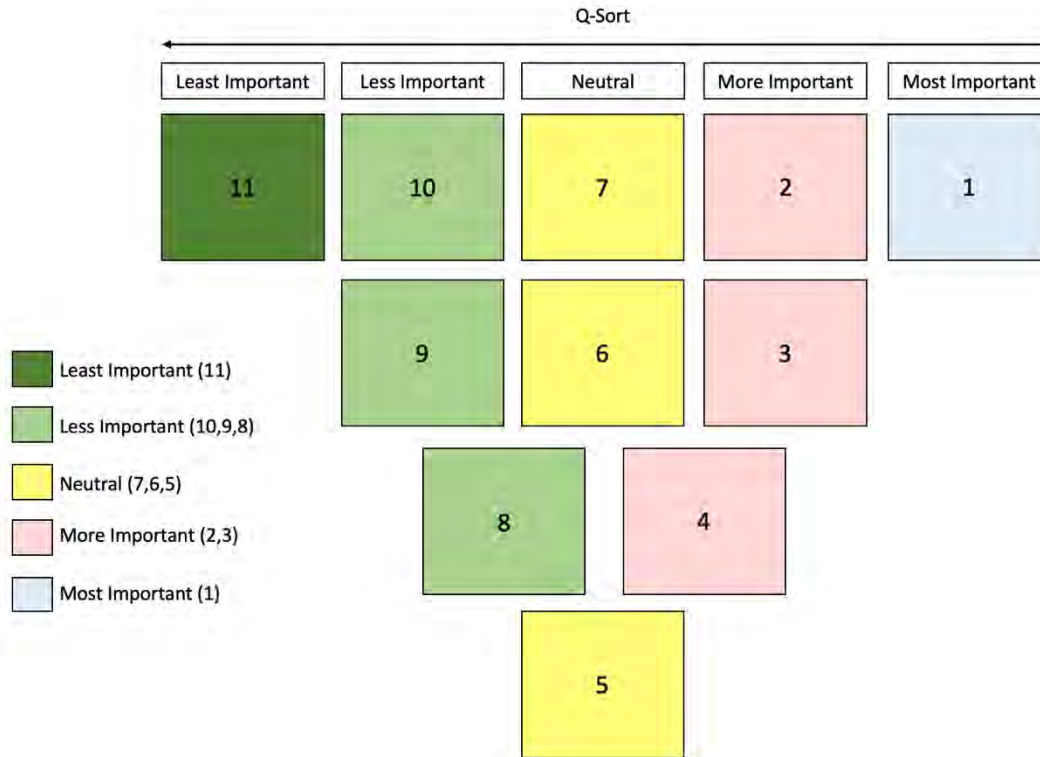
_____ Program Quality (4)

Q8 In your opinion, how important is a study abroad experience on your resume?

- Extremely important (1)
- Very important (2)
- Moderately important (3)
- Slightly important (4)
- Not at all important (5)

Q9 What do you find to be most appealing about your study abroad program?

- Independence (1)
- Opportunity to experience a different culture (2)
- Extended classroom experience (3)
- Opportunity to travel (4)
- Opportunity to expand my views (5)



Q10 Rank the following perceived benefits of study abroad from most important (1) to least important (11) based on your experience on this study abroad program.

- _____ Increased my self-confidence (1)
- _____ Served as a catalyst for increased maturity (2)
- _____ Has had a lasting impact on my world view (3)
- _____ Enhanced my interest in academic study (4)
- _____ Believe it will influence my educational experiences in the future (5)
- _____ Reinforced my commitment to studying and exploring foreign languages and cultures (6)
- _____ Helped me understand my own cultural values and biases (7)
- _____ Influenced me to seek out a greater diversity of friends (8)
- _____ Continues to influence interactions with people from different cultures (9)
- _____ Acquired skills that will influence my career path (10)
- _____ Altered my career direction (11)

Q11. Select the degree to which you agree with the following statements about the benefits of study abroad.

	Strongly Agree (1)	Agree (2)	Somewhat agree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat disagree (5)	Disagree (6)	Strongly disagree (7)
<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Contact with individuals with different backgrounds (e.g. race, national origin, sexual orientation) different from my own are an essential part of a college education (1)</p>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> I enjoy taking courses that challenge my beliefs and values (2)</p>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> I enjoy courses that make me think about things from a different perspective (3)</p>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Learning about people from different cultures is a very important part of my education (4)

Q12 Let us know if you have previously participated in one of the following high impact learning experiences:

	Yes (1)	No (2)
Another study abroad or exchange program (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Service learning or volunteering (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Undergraduate Research (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Internship and/or co-op (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leadership position in an organization on or off-campus (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Varsity sports (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q13 Rank the following motivations for you participating in this study abroad from most important (1) to least important (7).

- _____ I wanted to broaden my horizons (1)
- _____ I wanted to experience other cultures (2)
- _____ I wanted to improve my chances of getting a good job (3)
- _____ I wanted to improve my foreign language competence (4)
- _____ I wanted to get a different perspective on my subject (5)
- _____ I wanted to get a field experience that I couldn't get in my home country (6)
- _____ I wanted to become more independent (7)

Q14 The following are commonly listed as reasons for students participating in a study abroad program. Rank from most important (1) to least important (5).

- _____ Intellectual growth (1)
- _____ Professional development (2)
- _____ Personal growth (3)
- _____ Develop skills for relating to culturally different others (4)
- _____ Enhance self-awareness and understanding of my own culture (5)

Q15 Rank the following items from most important (1) to least important (9) barriers to students at your institution studying abroad.

- _____ Finances/costs (ie. no funding, no scholarships) (1)
- _____ Personal obligations (ie. health, family responsibilities, etc.) (2)
- _____ Timing of the program (3)
- _____ Don't have enough information to make a decision (4)
- _____ Not relevant to life/career/academic goals (5)
- _____ Parents/family are not supportive (6)
- _____ No interest in available study abroad opportunities (ie. want internship, not exchange; want shorter/longer exchange, etc.) (7)
- _____ School does not offer enough international opportunities (8)
- _____ Instructors/professors are not supportive of study abroad (9)