

Large-Scale Assessment of Student Attitudes after a Short-Term Study Abroad Program

Lisa Chieffo

University of Delaware

Lesia Griffiths

University of Delaware

Introduction

As national boundaries have lost their traditional significance over the past thirty years through increased travel, global telecommunications, and international trade and investment, it has become important for individuals to possess firsthand experience with other cultures. Traditionally, American undergraduates accomplish this by studying abroad. Yet the vast majority of undergraduate students in the United States do not include a sojourn abroad in their academic careers. In fact, fewer than 5% of American college students will earn credit abroad before they graduate, and most of them will remain abroad for a fairly brief period of time. Fewer students are participating in traditional “Junior Year Abroad” programs, and more are opting for semester programs or—even more frequently—short-term programs that last less than eight weeks. According to the latest data of the Institute for International Education (IIE), the percentage of students studying abroad for traditional, one-year terms has decreased from about 14% in 1993/94 to less than 8% in 2001/2002 (IIE, 2003)). In the same period, the proportion of students on short-term programs has risen from about 38% to nearly half of the total, making such programs the most common mode of overseas study by U.S. students today.

Given the enthusiasm with which higher education institutions tout their study abroad programs, one might assume that a plethora of data exists to indicate that students reap significant academic and personal benefits from such experiences, but in fact the opposite is true. Professionals in international education have long lamented the lack of a concrete, quantitative foundation of data upon which to base recruitment and program design strategies in order to maximize student learning outcomes. A good portion of the studies published to date have focused on small numbers of

students (usually fewer than 100, sometimes fewer than ten) spending at least one semester abroad, with much less attention given to short-term programs. Short-term programs that purport academic rigor are a fairly recent phenomenon. It has been less than ten years since Petersons, the well-known publisher of educational reference books, changed the name of its annual guide from *Vacation Study Abroad* to *Summer Study Abroad*. In the meantime nearly half of the students earning credit overseas are doing so for a period of fewer than eight weeks, leaving educators to explain or defend with only spotty evidence what the benefits of these shorter-term sojourns might be.

With this in mind, the University of Delaware's Center for International Studies (CFIS) embarked on the institution's first-ever study abroad assessment initiative. The University of Delaware (UD), a Carnegie II institution enrolling about 22,000 students of which 15,000 are undergraduates, has been active in study abroad since it launched the first "Junior Year Abroad" to Paris in 1923. The University often ranks among the top twenty research institutions in the nation in the number or percentage of students it sends abroad annually (Chin 2002; Desruisseaux 1999, 1998; Rubin 1996). Although it sponsored traditional long-term programs during most of the 1900s, with pauses during both world wars, overseas activity accelerated in the early 1970's with the establishment of Winterim, now known as Winter Session. This three-week January term between the fall and spring semesters lent itself to experimental courses and overseas adventures. Early Winterim destinations included Paris, Rome, Vienna, Berlin, London, and Geneva, the latter serving as a program site every year but one since 1972 (Kochanek, on-line). Study abroad began to flourish when the winter term expanded to five weeks in 1975. In January 1979, over 100 students went abroad to six sites; by 1980 the number of students and sites had doubled. Now, nearly 30 years after the first winter session program, the number of January-term programs exceeds 40 and includes all seven continents; and enrolls more than 1,000 students. Since the early days of Winterim, over 9,000 students have traveled abroad on University-sponsored short-term programs. In an average year, about 75% of students on UD overseas study programs go abroad during winter session, 15% during a five-week summer session, and 5% during each of the fall and spring semesters. By way of comparison, IIE reports 34% of study abroad participants spending a summer session overseas in 2001-2002, 39% remaining for a semester, and only 6% going abroad for a January term (IIE 2003).

Given UD's experience with short-term programs, and the large number of students who participate in them annually, the CFIS research team recognized it had access to enough students to generate a considerable amount of data on the impact of such programs. In addition, since approximately 8,000 UD students take 5-week winter session courses on the home campus, establishing a control group for the study

would not be difficult. Finally, the team expected that the broad range of UD program structures and geographic sites would lend a generalizing element to the data, thereby forming a foundation upon which other international education administrators could build for years to come. UD's longstanding semester programs were not chosen for this study because the courses, program sites, and academic majors of the participants are fairly homogenous and cannot compare to the diversity that exists during the winter session. Because participants on semester programs represent only about 10% of UD's total study abroad population, short-term programs are much more the "norm," and thus these were chosen as the sole object under study.

Methodology

The team's primary interest in conceiving this research project was to determine whether students taking courses abroad, regardless of the nature of their particular program, acquire "global awareness" to a greater extent than those who enroll in similar courses on campus and whether, at the end of the session, there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups. Global awareness was defined by four categories: intercultural awareness, personal growth and development, awareness of global interdependence; and functional knowledge of world geography and language. These four categories, in turn, informed the design of the research instrument described below. The project was also influenced by previous work done by the University of Georgia's Office of International Education on study abroad outcomes assessment. (See www.usg.edu/oie/initiatives/ for details.)

The team dismissed an initial plan to test for specific content knowledge and growth in various areas of awareness and personal development for two reasons. First, this would require pre- and post-testing of all students, an unmanageable task for a project involving over 2,300 respondents. Second, testing for specific content knowledge would detract from the goal of generalized data. The team hypothesized that UD's January programs, representing a wide range of disciplines and countries, formed a microcosm of short-term programs abroad. Although UD's programs have no common articulated goals, perhaps there would be some common outcomes that could then be assessed for programs sponsored by other institutions, or assessed in more depth for discipline-specific programs.

Finally, it is important to note that this project did not attempt to measure *actual* learning outcomes or changes in behavior. Instead, the results reflect *perceived* and *recalled* student activities and attitudes. This crucial point raises a number of questions that will be addressed in the final section of this article.

After considering these various factors, the research team decided that the primary goal was to generate a large quantity of generalizable data, covering programs over two

years (January 2003 and 2004), which would then form a base from which to develop future research questions. This led to the design of a survey instrument with items which reflect the four categories mentioned above. The survey is reproduced in Appendix A. The category of intercultural awareness (items 7, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 19, and 20) attempted to capture the degree to which students were conscious of similarities and differences between their culture and host cultures. Personal growth and development (items 3, 7, 8, 10, and 14), all of which relate to mature attitudes and actions and openness to new experiences. The third category, functional knowledge, involved learning or expressing a desire to learn information or skills relevant to travel in general or to a specific host site (items 1, 3, 5, 8, 9, 13, 16, 18, and 21). The survey items dealing with global interdependence (items 2, 4, 6, and 20) attempted to address students' awareness of the interconnectedness of national, international, and supra-national systems.

The survey instrument was an anonymous, one-page, paper computer scan sheet with twenty multiple-choice items (Likert scale and frequency) on the front and five demographic items on back. Students were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with the first ten statements, and to reflect back over the last 30 days and report the frequency with which they engaged in ten different activities. Demographic items included gender, major, grade point average (gpa), academic class, and current location (abroad or on campus). The survey also asked students to indicate how many times they had traveled abroad, and included one open-ended question: "What do you think is the most important thing you have learned in the past month?" The wording of survey items allowed the survey to be applicable to students at any study abroad location, and to students on campus as well.

UD's short-term program faculty directors administered the survey to students towards the end of their program. Surveys were completed by students on 71 of 75 eligible programs (at least four weeks in length) during the 2003 and 2004 winter sessions. The programs represented a broad distribution across academic departments, courses, and geographic locations. The response rate was 84% (1,509 out of 1,792 study abroad participants).

Most of the on-campus surveys were administered by course instructors, others by one of the researchers during the last week of winter session. Students were surveyed in 55 sections of 28 courses offered on campus in January 2003 and 2004 that were either identical or similar to those offered abroad. "Similar" was defined as being at the same level as the course abroad [introductory or advanced] and having some international or multicultural component, for example Politics of Developing Nations abroad versus American Foreign Policy on campus. The intent was to minimize the differences between the abroad and on-campus groups by assuming similar academic coursework

(based on academic level of the course and/or similarity of content). On-campus courses represented sixteen academic disciplines; 827 students responded, yielding a response rate of 82%.

Multivariate statistical analyses using SPSS software revealed that the respondents' academic year, gpa, and major contributed to significant response differences between the abroad and on-campus groups, while gender had no statistical impact. Nevertheless, all four demographic factors were controlled for when comparing means between the two groups. The students' responses to the short-answer question (item #27) were evaluated using an iterative process of qualitative analysis.

Results and Discussion

Not surprisingly, there were demographic differences between the students abroad and those on campus. The abroad group was disproportionately female, contained fewer freshmen, had a higher self-reported gpa, and included more students with natural science and pre-professional majors than those majoring in the humanities and social sciences. (See Table 1.)

Table 1: Respondent profile

Respondents	Abroad	On Campus
Gender		
Male	28.2%	42.9%
Female	71.8%	57.1%
GPA		
3.50-4.00	31.7%	19.6%
3.00-3.49	41.6%	35.9%
2.50-2.99	21.8%	32.4%
2.00-2.49	4.3%	11.1%
below 2.00	.6%	1.0%
Academic Year		
Senior	28.9%	32.5%
Junior	34.6%	31.3%
Sophomore	28.6%	24.3%
Freshman	7.9%	11.9%
Major		
Arts and Humanities	26.5%	29.5%
Social Sciences	17.9%	24.0%
Natural Sciences	10.7%	9.6%
Professional/Pre-professional	42.1%	34.8%
Undeclared	2.8%	2.0%

Table 2: Means by location

survey item	item category*	mean		Significant (p<.05)?
		abroad	on campus	
1. Know how to make phone call	FK	4.16	3.10	yes
2. Know how foreign manufacturing affects price	GI	3.55	3.10	no
3. Want to attain fluency in foreign language	FK/PG	3.95	3.73	yes
4. Explain U.S. foreign policy to someone from another country	GI	3.39	2.97	no ¹
5. Know U.S. dollar conversion rate	FK	4.39	3.68	yes
6. Comfortable in understanding of U.S. trade relations	GI	3.38	2.96	no
7. Patient with those who don't speak English well	IA/PG	4.01	3.83	yes
8. Can communicate in at least one foreign language with native speakers	FK/PG	3.50	3.38	yes
9. Want to learn more world geography	FK	3.93	3.67	yes
10. Recently developed greater appreciation for arts	PG	4.03	3.55	yes
11. Number of times studied/traveled abroad	N/A	2.71	1.72	yes
12. Read article, watched TV show about how Americans are viewed	IA	3.58	3.52	yes
13. Watched non-American TV	FK/IA	3.82	2.38	yes
14. Consciously withheld judgment on international event/issue	PG/IA	3.33	2.99	no
15. Thought about differences between myself and people in other countries	IA	4.19	3.44	yes
16. Looked up something on map of another country	FK	3.72	3.46	yes
17. Thought about similarities between myself and people in other countries	IA	3.96	3.12	yes
18. Looked up non-English word in dictionary	FK	3.61	2.67	no
19. Thought about a current issue important to people in a developing country	IA	3.41	3.13	yes ²
20. Thought about why other countries have different perspectives than U.S.	IA/GI	3.54	2.80	yes
21. Listened to music not sung in English	FK	4.06	3.05	yes

Key: *IA = intercultural awareness; FK = functional knowledge; GI = global interdependence; PG = personal growth and development

¹The mean difference for item #4 was significant in 2003 but insignificant in 2004.

²The mean difference for item #19 was insignificant in 2003 but significant in 2004.

The four broad categories used to develop the survey items form a useful framework with which to analyze the results. (As mentioned above, some items are subsumed by two categories, as indicated in Table 2.) In the category of intercultural awareness (comprised of items 7, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 19, and 20), significant differences were found for all items except 14, indicating that students in the abroad group were generally more cognizant than their peers at home of varying national and cultural perspectives. Simply put, the students abroad were more apt to recognize that, “the whole world is not like the U.S.,” and “there are other cultures that exist very differently from our own,” as two students wrote as a response to the open-ended question.

Perhaps the lack of significance in item 14 can be attributed to the fact that for the past two years the Iraq war has been a prominent topic in American public discourse,

so students on campus may have been more likely to consider an international issue than if there had been more peaceful activity on the U.S. foreign policy front, thereby reducing the disparity between the home and abroad groups. The fact that the mean difference for item 19 was insignificant in 2003 but significant in 2004 is probably due to the fact that only about 25% of participants studied in a developing country in 2003, while in 2004 the figure was 35%.

In the category of personal growth and development (items 3, 7, 8, 10, and 14) the difference in mean responses to all items (except item 14) was significant. The fact that students abroad reported developing a greater appreciation for the arts than those on campus is not surprising, especially given the fact that UD's study abroad programs, regardless of their academic concentration, almost always include excursions to fine arts venues and events.

Items 3, 7, and 8 all relate to communication and language skills. Despite the fact that about the same number of students in both the abroad and on-campus groups were taking a foreign language course (approximately one-third), those abroad were more disposed to communicating in a foreign language and considered themselves more patient with people who do not speak English well. This attitude difference may be attributable in part to the students on programs in non-English speaking countries who were not studying a foreign language. These students, who presumably were not fluent in the language of their host country, were faced with the daily challenge of trying to communicate in an environment where they were at a distinct verbal disadvantage. Given these struggles, it may be that these students became more empathetic towards non-native speakers of English in the U.S., and that they realized the importance of knowing the local language when traveling. Indeed, even the students participating in language-based programs, most of whom were not at an advanced level of proficiency, were confronted with authentic linguistic encounters that made the importance of second-language acquisition much more real and immediate than their stay-at-home peers could ever realize.

The mean differences were significant for all but one of the items categorized as "functional knowledge" (items 1, 3, 5, 8, 9, 13, 16, 18, and 21) which ranged from knowing how to make a telephone call abroad to listening to music sung in a language other than English. These findings demonstrate that students who go abroad, even for as little as one month, are learning how to perform tasks associated with international travel, and they are engaging in activities to learn more about their host site and host culture (for example learning more about geography, watching a non-American TV show, and becoming fluent in a foreign language). While students on campus could engage in all of these activities, they are obviously less motivated to do so since in most cases there is little if any relevance to their immediate surroundings.

The mean difference was insignificant only for item 18, "I looked up a non-English word in the dictionary." This result is difficult to explain. Although approximately the same percentage of respondents in each group were enrolled in foreign language courses, nearly 60% of the students abroad were in a country where English is not the common language. Therefore one might expect the students abroad to rely heavily on their dictionaries and look up non-English words more frequently than their peers on campus. This appears not to have been the case. It may be that the non-foreign language programs in non-English speaking countries have highly structured itineraries, such that students are not compelled to interact in the local language to such an extent that they would need a dictionary. One might also posit that in their free time these students simply attempted to use English as much as possible in their encounters with host nationals and to get along without using local terminology.

Under the category of global interdependence there was no statistical difference between the two groups' responses to the items that asked about their understanding of U.S. trade relations and foreign manufacturing (items 2 and 6). It may be that both of these items require knowledge that is too specific, such that it is unreasonable to expect students across a wide array of majors to feel comfortable with either topic. More general items relating to global interdependence may be better suited to future iterations of this survey.

In 2003 the abroad group felt more confident than the on-campus group in explaining U.S. foreign policy to someone from another country (item 4), but by 2004 the groups were statistically identical. One can postulate that the students who went abroad in 2003 were involved in provocative conversations with host nationals (especially in light of controversy about the impending Iraq war) and were compelled to discuss U.S. foreign policy with their interlocutors. By January of 2004, discussion and debate of such topics had become so commonplace in the national discourse that international travel was no longer a deciding factor in whether students felt able to explain U.S. foreign policy. A significant difference exists between the groups' responses to item 20, "I thought about why other countries may have a different perspective than the U.S. on global issues," indicating that those who travel may develop greater sensitivity towards other world-views.

Item 11 asked students how many times they had studied or traveled abroad, and, not surprisingly, the abroad group reported a higher frequency than the on-campus group. However, poor word choice on the 2003 version of the survey may have led students to respond to this item incorrectly, thereby skewing the results. Nearly 100 students in the abroad group that year reported that they had never traveled abroad. If they had responded appropriately, the mean difference between the two groups would have been even greater. (This wording flaw was corrected in the second version of the survey administered in 2004.) Nevertheless, there was no correlation

between the frequency of international travel and students' responses to survey items. That is, the data do not demonstrate that the more times students have been abroad, the more likely they are to respond in a particular way. The only difference appears to be whether or not the students have been abroad at all during the period under study.

The students' responses to the survey instrument's one open-ended question were categorized by topic according to an iterative process of qualitative analysis. This item yielded a wealth of information about the students' insights and experiences. Perhaps the most notable piece of data is the fact that the 1,509 students abroad generated 1,408 unique comments (nearly a 1:1 ratio), while the on-campus group of 827 produced only 473 comments. If nothing else, the students who went abroad had more to say about their learning experiences over the past month than those who stayed at home.

After multiple readings, the students' comments were put into 25 categories based on what they characterized as the most important thing learned, for example "course-related knowledge," "tolerance/patience/understanding," "acknowledgment of other views of the U.S.," and "knowledge of self". The responses of the students abroad were spread over a very wide range of categories, with no one category including more than 13.4% of the comments. Top categories representing nearly half of responses included knowledge/appreciation of another country or culture (13.4%), tolerance/patience/understanding (8.9%), course-related knowledge (7.9%), difference between home and host country (7.9%), and language/communication issues (7.8%). Other categories garnering at least 5% of the abroad group's comments included acknowledgment of foreign views of the U.S. (6.6%), and trip and travel-related knowledge (5.3%).

By contrast, responses from the on-campus group were undeniably focused on classroom learning, with 44.6% of comments subsumed under the category of course-related knowledge (compared to 7.9% of the responses of those abroad). Beyond the classroom, students on campus revealed that the most important thing they learned related to current events (7.8% of responses) and to "life lessons" such as "Life can throw you many curve balls" (9.3%). Nearly 6% of the comments from students on campus were categorized as nonsensical or unclear. No other category was represented by more than 5% of responses.

The students' written comments clearly indicate that those who went abroad had much to say about their experience, and that the overwhelming majority of their comments related to out-of-classroom learning, both ideological and personal. About 27% of the comments from the abroad group included responses related to personal growth and development such as adaptability, flexibility, patience, responsibility, respect for others, and appreciation for the arts. Nearly 30% learned to view the U.S. differently, acknowledging their position of privilege in the world, noting differences

between the U.S. and their host countries, indicating a greater awareness of global interconnectedness, and in some cases openly criticizing U.S. policy. The students' comments, a few of which are listed below, complement and lend meaning to the study's quantitative findings:

- From a student in Argentina: "To be honest, I've realized how fortunate I am to have had the opportunities in life that have been presented to me. Also, when you get down to it, people are all the same everywhere."
- From a student in Italy: "[The most important thing is] the importance of thinking more globally and being aware of other cultures ... not being caught up in American ignorance."
- From a student in Martinique: "I feel that I have learned to be open-minded and not judgmental. There are millions of people in this world, and there are lots of people who are just like me. The world is not confined to my backyard. Traveling is a very important part of life for me now."
- From a student in New Zealand: "I gained a whole new perspective on how other cultures view American politics, considering our current pre-war situation."

B r o a d e r I m p l i c a t i o n s a n d F u r t h e r S t u d y

Based on the data yielded by this first study, it was concluded that short-term programs, even as short as one month, are worthwhile educational endeavors that have significant self-perceived impacts on students' intellectual and personal lives. The data collected over a two-year period from over 2,300 students provide a much needed base of information from which international educators can begin to draw conclusions about the impacts of short-term programs abroad.

Moreover, it is hoped that these findings will spawn new research questions. For example, with the rise in popularity of short-term programs, it is likely that more and more students will participate in multiple programs—perhaps multiple short-term programs. At the University of Delaware, just over 10% of program participants are "repeats". How might this group differ from those studying abroad for the first time, or from students who participate in one long-term program? As a greater number of universities and colleges begin sponsoring their own programs abroad designed to appeal to a more diverse student population, short-term programs are taking on new shapes, sometimes lasting only three weeks or less, sometimes involving service learning projects instead of traditional coursework. What is the impact of these "mini programs" on students, and how might their learning differ if traditional coursework is not involved?

In this study, the research team consciously chose to measure perceived learning outcomes rather than actual outcomes, which would have required pre- and post-tests and

student identification numbers. While a study of this sort cannot measure change, it can measure perceived impact, and with a suitable control group it can measure such impact compared to another population. In this case, the data clearly demonstrate that the students who spent the month abroad were more confident in their levels intercultural awareness and functional knowledge than their peers who remained on campus. Additionally, they engaged in more internationally-minded activities and described their learning in much broader and non-academic categories than their counterparts. Future studies may focus on subgroups of students (for example particular majors or particular program sites) and use traditional pre- and post-treatment instruments to examine in detail some of the specific issues left unresolved by this first-time investigation.

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Appendix

International Awareness and Activities Survey

Please use the following scale for items 1-10:

- | | |
|----------------------|-------------------|
| A= Strongly Disagree | D= Agree |
| B= Disagree | E= Strongly Agree |
| C=Indifferent | |

1. I know how to make a phone call to someone in a different country.
2. I understand how foreign manufacturing affects the price of consumer goods in the U.S.

- 3. During this course term I have become more interested in attaining fluency in another language.
- 4. I can explain some aspect of U.S. foreign policy to someone from another country.
- 5. I know the currency conversion rate for the U.S. dollar to at least one foreign currency.
- 6. I feel comfortable in my understanding of U.S. trade relations with at least one foreign country.
- 7. I am patient with people in the U.S. who don't speak English well.
- 8. I am comfortable in my ability to communicate with members of at least one foreign culture in their native language.
- 9. I am interested in learning more about world geography.
- 10. During this course term I have developed a greater appreciation for the arts (in the form of buildings, paintings, literary works etc.)
- 11. How many times have you studied or traveled abroad?

A= not at all

D= 6-8 times

B= 1-2 times

E= more than 8 times

C= 3-5 times

Please use the following scale for items 12-21:

A= never D= frequently (couple times a week)

B= rarely E = a lot (more than 10 times)

C= occasionally (about once a week)

During the last 30 days

- 12. I read an article, watched a TV show, or spoke to someone about how Americans are viewed by people from other countries.
- 13. I watched a non-American TV station, news broadcast, or television show.
- 14. I have consciously withheld judgment on a controversial international event until I learned more facts.
- 15. I thought about the differences between myself and people from other countries.
- 16. I looked up something on a map of another country.
- 17. I thought about the similarities between myself and people from other countries.

18. I looked up a non-English word in a dictionary.
19. I thought about a current issue that's important to the people of a developing country.
20. I thought about why other countries may have a different perspective than the U.S. on global issues such as agricultural production, trade, or the environment.
21. I listened to music sung in a language other than English.
22. I am a: A. male B. female
23. I am a: A. freshman B. sophomore C. junior D. senior E. other
24. My major is best characterized under the following heading:
 - A. arts and humanities
 - B. social sciences
 - C. natural sciences (for ex. biology, chemistry, animal science)
 - D. professional/pre-professional (for ex. nursing, education, apparel design, engineering, business)
 - E. undeclared
25. To the best of my knowledge, my GPA fits within the following range:
 - A. 3.50-4.00
 - B. 3.00-3.49
 - C. 2.50-2.99
 - D. 2.00-2.49
 - E. below 2.00
26. I am currently taking courses: A. abroad B. on campus
27. Short answer: What do you think is the most important thing you have learned in the past month, either in or out of the classroom? (This may or may not pertain to international awareness.)