

The Intangible Benefits of Study Abroad Programs

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore the benefits of studying abroad that cannot be easily quantified with statistical data. These benefits will be explored via examining research that demonstrates the importance study abroad programs held among students who participated in them. This article will primarily be utilizing the research of Miller-Perrin and Thompson, who have examined studies that demonstrate a broad array of benefits for overseas education, and have come to the conclusion that study abroad programs are an integral aspect of the educational system with benefits for students that last a lifetime.

Nearly every college in the United States offers a study abroad program. In 2017, 332,727 U.S. students were studying abroad for credit. U.S. students who were not studying in the United States represented almost two percent of all enrolled students and ten percent of graduates (NAFSA, n.d.). The growing importance of a global education cannot be understated as the benefits reach beyond academics. Students who are able to participate in study abroad programs develop skill sets necessary to achieve success multiple fields.

Going to another country for any purpose is a risk, and an expensive one. Considering the budget, for most students, it is an intimidating proposition, so it is not something to be considered lightly. The cost of traveling to a foreign country can become quite prohibitive. Airfare to another continent from the United States can add an

additional two thousand dollars to the cost of the study abroad semester, or one thousand dollars if the trip is extended over two semesters.

Yet, the benefits of studying abroad are many and have long-term implications. A study by Holly Trowser and Wolfgang Lehman observed that students in the United Kingdom were more likely to have higher grade point averages if they had participated in a study abroad program. The same study also found that participating students were more likely to be employed six months after graduation (276). While some of the findings in this study focused on students who studied abroad at foreign institution during their entire undergraduate experience, the study noted the employability improvement for any student who participated in study abroad, regardless of the length of the program.

One reason for this increase in employability might be second language or even dialect acquisition, which represents an increase in the communication skills of the student. A study found that, “There is ample evidence that students who participate in an educational experience in an international program demonstrate an increase in second language proficiency” (Thompson, 2014, 78).

The same study also found that:

Students were asked to reflect on their attitudes both before and after their study abroad experience and findings indicated that those students who studied abroad showed higher levels of international political concern, cross-cultural interest, and cultural cosmopolitanism compared to students who did not study abroad (Thompson, 2014, 79).

Thompson and Miller-Perin describe the concept of initiation, in which the student abroad comes to terms with the reality that the new locale is not home. This is a stage in which students abroad live as pilgrims and chronicle their experiences. This is an opportunity for chronicling the journey through writing, photography, or collection of artifacts. The researchers interviewed students, one noted that living overseas was both a most difficult and thrilling experience, one that forced the removal of all safety nets while forcing a shift in thinking (Thompson, Miller-Perin, 2014, 84).

A study by Streitweiser & Light highlighted four conceptions of international experience when engaging with foreign cultures. The conceptions suggest a hierarchy of engagement. The first was simply observing the other culture and

making comparisons, possibly to contrast cultural norms with the cultural norms from home. The second level went slightly deeper, it allows for interaction with the other culture but the participant still maintains their home cultures practices for the most part. The third level involved purposefully using another culture’s own practices to engage with it. And the final level involved embracing the other culture and adopting its ways as part of the participants own life (Streitweiser & Light, 2018, 8).

Each of the stages of development suggest a decrease in ethnocentrism, which is the inability to engage with or see the positive aspects of a culture other than one’s own. The study further suggests the utility of the levels in assessing the cultural competence and growth of students before and after an experience abroad. They suggest that their system is not limited to defining individuals, but can be used as a measure to determine stages of intercultural development. Their study suggests that the study abroad experience encourages growth in student culturalization, and this is one way such growth can be more clearly defined. (Streitweiser & Light, 2018, 14).

Study abroad programs are shown through the work of Thompson and Miller-Perin in examining a cross-section of studies to have a multitude of benefits that are difficult to quantify. Survey results demonstrate overwhelmingly positive feedback from students who have undertaken the study abroad experience. The collection of evidence demonstrates increased tolerance, acceptance of different systems, and decreased ethnocentrism among students returning from overseas study. While these benefits can not be absolutely statistically quantified, they are a

major factor in the need for international education.

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