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Recommended Citation

Olsen, Ellora, "Life-Long Benefits of Studying Abroad" (2020). *Library Research Prize Student Works*. 17. <https://spark.bethel.edu/library-research-prize-work/17>

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Life-Long Benefits of Studying Abroad

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Inquiry Seminar
April 27, 2020

9 AM in Tokyo, Japan is when instead of being a commuter, you get to be a sardine. Physically crammed into the train with hundreds of other people, you better be prepared to get comfortable (or uncomfortable, if we're being honest) for your hour-long ride, with skyscrapers as far as the eye can see zipping past. It may not be the most enjoyable, but it is one of those experiences where a person stops feeling like a tourist and starts feeling like one of the natives. Studying abroad does that, it is a unique time when students can do more than just visit a country. It's the time when they have the opportunity to live and experience what a native might experience rather than the shallow encounter that a tourist would have with a culture.

Students who live in one country their whole life have no reason to even consider the fact that there is a whole other world that they haven't seen or thought about. Culture is something that people are blind to until they experience an "other". People think that what they know is all there is, but obviously that can't be true, there are hundreds of different cultures that view the world and the things inside it so differently, if they never have to face that fact then they won't be able to look critically at their own way of viewing the world. By living and studying in another country, students are given an opportunity to gain cultural understanding and also to develop personally.

Study abroad and Cultural Understanding

There are many motivations for studying abroad, but the most drastic gain which will occur is cultural understanding. This is a broad term meaning to be influenced by or further understand culture, and in terms of studying abroad, this means becoming more influenced by a different country's culture. This can mean a student changes in a lot of different ways, by

increasing their communications skills, by increasing their cultural empathy, by deepening their appreciation for music and dance. A study by Tracy Rundstrom Williams¹ showed that “students who study abroad do in fact show a greater change in intercultural communication skills than students who stay on campus,” and explained that this had a lot to do with the exposure to other cultures.

This change in communication skills is important but perhaps the biggest change comes from the change in a student’s ethnocentric mindset. In a study by Helen Marx², she talks about what this is, saying an “ethnocentric worldview is “the experience of one’s own culture as ‘central to reality’” and where “the beliefs and behaviors that people receive in their primary socialization are unquestioned: they are experienced as ‘just the way things are’”. In her study she examined whether or not studying abroad moved students towards a more ethnorelative worldview, a mindset where one’s culture is merely on choice amongst many, equally valid, choices, and where one can move towards integration with a culture. The findings of Marx’s study did indeed confirm that, yes, study abroad pushes students toward a more ethnorelative worldview, that experiencing a new culture does indeed increase a person’s cultural sensitivity.

¹ Williams, Tracy Rundstrom. “Exploring the Impact of Study Abroad on Students' Intercultural Communication Skills: Adaptability and Sensitivity - Tracy Rundstrom Williams, 2005.” SAGE Journals, December 1, 2005. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1028315305277681>.

² Bennet (2004) in:

Marx, Helen, and David M. Moss. “Please Mind the Culture Gap: Intercultural Development During a Teacher Education Study Abroad Program.” *Journal of Teacher Education* 62, no. 1 (January 2011): 35–47. doi:10.1177/0022487110381998.

Another study by Ager Gondra³ talks about the ways that even short-term study abroad can increase someone's cultural understanding, in cases where students go to a minority area within a country. She found that students who were involved with smaller sects of culture ended up walking away with a more developed understanding of a country's culture. Not all students can afford to take a term-long study abroad program, so this a method is a good substitute for the cultural understanding gain of a longer term abroad.

Study Abroad and Personal Growth

There are many benefits that stem from cultural understanding, but the most important benefit is personal growth. This growth comes from the increased understanding another culture and how it differs from the culture a person is born into, and thus having a greater understanding of the ways that culture affects that person and the way they see the world. Personal development is defined as the "process of growth, evolution, expansion, and maturation of the individual self."⁴ In the same way that revealing a falsehood makes the truth clearer, increasing the level a person understands another culture makes the culture a person knows become more easily understood and examined. It is hard to even tell what parts of a person are affected by

³ Gondra, Ager, and Lori Czerwionka. "Intercultural Knowledge Development during Short-Term Study Abroad in the Basque Country: A Cultural and Linguistic Minority Context." *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* 30, no. 3 (January 1, 2018): 119–46. <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.bethel.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ1197605&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

⁴ Wiedenhoef, Margaret Davis. "Study Abroad Program Design, Personal Development and Intercultural Effectiveness." *ProQuest LLC*. ProQuest LLC, 2011. <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.bethel.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=ED529234&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

culture until you see how another culture affects a person differently. Part of the reason for this is because students who study abroad are forced into an environment that they are not used to. If college is accepted as a time when people are thrown from the life they know into a new life of independence and the reaction to that new lifestyle is personal development, then that increase in development will only be enhanced by students being thrown into an entirely different environment where there are entirely different norms than what they are used to i.e., studying abroad. “Even if students do not experience an emotional tension, they will still experience a process that confronts a different set of values and determines how their own values compare with those of the host culture.”⁵

In a study done in 2019 by Frans H. Doppen⁶ which reflected on the American national identity and what it meant to be an American, or what an American was, and one thing that was made clear was that people tend to have a ‘we’ mentality. Not only does this mentality exist but people also tend to be oblivious to what characteristics make up this ‘we’. The danger being that when a person is within a ‘we’ group there is by default a ‘them’ group as well. The downfalls of this us-them mentality are fairly well know, lack of communication, lack of empathy/understanding to name a few, and a lot of the time simply diagnosing the cognitive problems can be the cure, once one notice it one become aware of the times they are stuck in

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Doppen, Frans H., and Bahman Shahri. “Overseas Student Teachers’ Reflections on American National Identity: A Longitudinal Study.” *Journal of International Social Studies* 9, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 72–92. <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.bethel.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ1215091&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

these mindsets. However, studying abroad is more like a treatment, after going and living in another culture it blurs the lines of the ‘we’ mindset and lets us see the characteristics that make up someone’s culture and not only that, it also lets people see the characteristics that make up other cultures too, and suddenly they’re not just a blank-faced ‘them’ but another ‘we’ group that one can belong to.

Another aspect of personal growth is how to relate oneself with the place. Place is “how the world presents itself; that is to say, ‘being’ inevitably requires a place, a situation, for its disclosure,”⁷ and so on can never consider themselves without also considering ‘place’. The goal for studying abroad, however, is not only to understand how one’s original place shaped them (although that is an important aspect of understanding oneself and studying abroad does facilitate this as well) it is to loosen the binds restricting one from understanding how other places can shape you. When studying abroad, students start to be able to relate to different places and, especially when under pressure and with a group, this helps students relate to each other better and feel less stressed when out of their comfort zone.

Although it is true that studying abroad increases a person’s employability, that is not the sole reason or even the biggest reason why students choose to go. A study by Holly Trower⁸

⁷ Harper, Nevin J. “Locating Self in Place During a Study Abroad Experience: Emerging Adults, Global Awareness, and the Andes.” *Journal of Experiential Education* 41, no. 3 (September 2018): 295–311. doi:10.1177/1053825918761995.

⁸ Trower, Holly, and Wolfgang Lehmann. “Strategic Escapes: Negotiating Motivations of Personal Growth and Instrumental Benefits in the Decision to Study Abroad.” *British Educational Research Journal* 43, no. 2 (April 2017): 275–89. doi:10.1002/berj.3258.

asked students either intending to go abroad or already abroad about their motivation behind leaving the country to study, and she found that rather than being motivated by instrumental gain, the students were instead motivated by the prospect of personal growth, increased independence, and experiencing new places and culture. Students don't want to remain ignorant of the world, they want to experience it.

Necessary Methods for Increased Gain of Study Abroad Trips

Students have the desire to go abroad, now more than ever, and there are a few ways universities can make this easier for them to accomplish. The main one being the availability of a study abroad program at all, and preferably one with a variety of options.⁹ Other way are through college leadership pushing and strongly recommending studying in a foreign country and also having faculty be involved in the planning and management of the possible programs, so students can feel secure in the decision to go abroad to study.

However, the person responsible for making sure that a student gets the most out of studying abroad as possible is not the school, it is the student themselves. The biggest factor of the benefits of studying abroad is the length of the trip.¹⁰ Although other factors tend to affect the

⁹Lecaque, Patrick. "Creating a Study Abroad Culture at a Public Liberal Arts University: The Case of Truman State University." *Journal of Public Affairs* 8 (August 2005): 11–28. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.bethel.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=20083305&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

¹⁰Dwyer, and Mary M. "More Is Better: The Impact of Study Abroad Program Duration." *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*. Frontiers Journal. Dickinson College P.O. Box 1773, Carlisle, PA 17013. Tel: 717-254-8858; Fax: 717-245-1677; Web site: <http://www.frontiersjournal.com>, November 30, 2003. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ891454>.

outcome as well, such as whether or not the students stayed in a homestay, the amount that they tried to use the language while there, or whether or not they volunteered or otherwise worked in the society, students who stayed for a full year tended to have increased involvement in all these aspects.

As mentioned above, although it may be more beneficial for students to study abroad long-term, that is not feasible for all students, and when that is the case some study abroad is better than no study abroad. However, because of the benefits in increased cultural understanding, more and more schools are sending students on short term trip in order to increase the number of students going abroad. Due to the shortness of the trip, the benefit of these programs is decreasing, because, according to Kelly Lemmons, students tend to stick to the cultural “path of least resistance.”¹¹ When only in foreign countries for a short amount of time, students tend to stick with the other foreign students and forsake activities which would further their cultural understanding. Of course, not all students do this, but many do, and so schools should encourage students to take a longer term abroad for the sake of reaping genuine lifelong benefits from the experience. However, if it’s between a short study abroad program and no study abroad, a student will still gain from taking a trip, regardless of the length.

¹¹ Lemmons, Kelly. “Short-Term Study Abroad: Culture and the Path of Least Resistance.” *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 39, no. 4 (November 2015): 543–53.
doi:10.1080/03098265.2015.1084607.

Conclusion

Based on the studies discussed above, it can be concluded that studying abroad, especially when done in the right manner, can increase a student's cultural understanding and develop them as a person. These are critical components to becoming a well-rounded individual and especially useful in a country like America where one is surrounded by hundreds of different cultures. They are also useful in college while you are meeting and interacting with tons of people.

College is a special time in a student's life, a time when they are uniquely free and independent. They no longer have parents who control nearly all aspects of their life and they are not to the point of being tied down with a full-time "adult" job. This is the time that students can make big decisions for their life, and really, the possibilities are limitless. It's also a time of great development. However, staying in one spot, never leaving the metaphorical pond where they were raised, is perhaps one of the worst decisions one could make.

This is the time in a person's life when they can be more easily uprooted, they have not even had time to develop roots, and this time is the perfect opportunity to make a life-changing decision. Study abroad changes a student's life, no one goes and then comes back completely the same, there is always change. Not choosing to go, in the time of their life where change is easy, not only easy but also unpreventable, would be unwise. Students going through university change, it's called growing up, and studying abroad is a way that they can funnel that change so that it causes growth in areas that will benefit them throughout their entire life, and really it's the only time they are easily able to take a trip, a life-changing trip, for the rest of their life. By

studying abroad students can both further their education and increase their cultural understanding and thus their personal growth,

Study abroad isn't the only way to experience these benefits of course, a, intentional trip with the same goals of these programs would do the trick, but unfortunately most adults cannot afford to take a trip of which the length is long enough to facilitate these changes. Travelling with the right mindset can increase cultural understanding, but this understanding will never match students who lived in a country for months at a time. In reality, there is no way to mimic the benefits of studying abroad except for actually living in another country, and this is why its so essential that students take this time *now*, when they are as unfettered as any adult can be, to go and experience another culture.

Understanding where one came from is essential for understanding a person. They say the way someone was raised hugely impacts who they become, so isn't it easy to understand that the culture that shapes the way someone looks at *everything*, also shapes every aspect of who they are and how they see the world? This point highlights why it is so important to study in another country, one need to understand their culture to understand themselves, and the best way to do that is by going and experiencing another culture. Studying abroad makes this happen, it increases one's cultural understanding and as a reaction to that they grow and mature as a person. Every student should see their college years as an opportunity to grow as much as possible and studying abroad makes this happen. Everyone should experience what it feels like to become part of another culture, to stop being another tourist and to become a native and studying abroad is the best way to do this.

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