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Study Abroad and Global Leadership

Why international experience is a vital part of higher education in the 21st century, and how to make it work for American Students

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Global Studies Capstone Seminar

I would like to thank my parents, my friends, and my classmates for their outstanding support and feedback, especially on the home stretch; my teachers, Kara Cebulko and Michelle DePlante; and all of the people who shall remain nameless who took the time out of their busy schedules to sit down and answer my silly questions out of the goodness of their hearts.

And to the children: You are the future! Always wanted to say that.

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ABSTRACT

Even though most American colleges and universities now include something about fostering global consciousness or global citizenship in their mission statements, *only one percent* of American students actually leave their home campus to set off and see the globe during their college careers. The literature stands behind the argument that study abroad is an intrinsically valuable part of higher education with numerous lasting and diverse benefits to students, especially in today's thoroughly globalized and interconnected world. Now more than ever, students need to gain a critical understanding of themselves in relation to the rest of the world in order to develop fully and completely as human beings. Through qualitative interviews with students and study abroad faculty and staff at three private New England universities, this study finds that the biggest reasons most American students don't go abroad are 1) self-selection – many students are just content not doing it; and 2) perceived barriers to studying abroad that students assume they cannot overcome. This study also proposes a model for an ideal study abroad office that American universities can follow with the goals of becoming more student-centered and ultimately sending more of their students overseas. The author is at times serious, at times whimsical; at times formal, at times casual; even at times a bit snarky, but at all times he is genuinely concerned with improving study abroad as an entity.

INTRODUCTION

Study abroad is the new college. The things that used to define the uniquely "college experience" – becoming independent, meeting new people, learning new things, growing as a person, having the time of your life – now apply more widely and appropriately to study abroad than to higher education in general. International experience is incredibly valuable for American students, especially during the college years, when personal identities are prone to undergoing drastic revisions, and intellectual development is at its peak.

So why don't more American students study abroad? What barriers do they perceive to doing it, and how do these barriers vary across institutions? What are the disconnects between what students perceive as obstacles and what their advisers in the study abroad office perceive as obstacles? It is important to answer these questions if we, as a nation, wish to truly create capable global leaders with our system of higher education. The only way a student can even begin to gain an understanding of what it means to be a "global citizen" is to actually experience the globe; to spend time abroad, immersed in a foreign culture, surrounded by the people and customs of a foreign country.

Trying to find an American student who doesn't feel like their time spend abroad changed them permanently and positively as a person is like trying to find a pin in a straw stack (or something). American colleges and universities need to make their study abroad offices a priority and recognize the tremendous personal growth studying abroad affords

students – not to mention the enhanced marketability with which international education can equip them. Similarly, study abroad offices need to step up their game to become helpful, accessible resources in order to maximize the number of students who will have such a life-changing experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

With ever-increasing interdependence of nations and proliferation of culture and information in the world, it is important to understand the role that being educated in a foreign-country setting can have in a person's life, academically and beyond. As returnees' reviews of study abroad experiences have been overwhelmingly positive since the idea's inception and rise to popularity in the 1920's and '30's (Chieffo and Griffiths 2009), it is important to understand what it is about this experience that evokes such an eager and powerful response. Students may often find that they cannot quite put their finger on what made their experience so enjoyable, other than the fact that it was new and exciting. By understanding how abroad education affects students' notions of personal and national identity and citizenship, we can understand its role and importance in our American system of higher education in the future, and its role in realizing the accomplishment of higher education's long-professed goal of creating capable global leaders.

Liberal arts colleges almost invariably include something about global awareness or global citizenship in their mission statements (Brockington and Wiedenhoeft 2009), yet study abroad is not a curriculum requirement at most four-year institutions in this country. Additionally, the typical American student who chooses and is able to spend time abroad is upper middle class, white, and female (Picard, Bernardino, and Ehigiator 2009). Using data from 2008, Picard et al. reveal that "the number of students who study abroad represents less than 2% of the total national student population." Furthermore,

Picard et al. estimate that on average between 1997 and 2007, women comprised about 65% of the study abroad student pool, and whites constituted almost 85%. From these statistics it is clear that there must be personal and/or institutional barriers that students face to study abroad, perhaps during the decision making process or perhaps during the application process. Revealing and understanding these barriers is necessary for our understanding of why most American students do not engage in a degree of international education during their university years, even though studying abroad is an invaluable experience with intrinsic personal and educational value.

Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Value

"To live – and succeed – in the world as it is today, we need to develop new ways of thinking and acting. And to do this, we need to develop new ways of learning" (Nolan 2009). Study abroad is a worthwhile pursuit, and an invaluable part of higher learning. Nolan (2009) argues that although it is difficult to prove quantitatively why it is so transformative, the value-added of international experience is undebatable (272).

Admittedly, the question of *intrinsic* value is a point of minor contention in the literature and presumably in the academic community at large. Chieffo and Griffiths (2009), examining short-term study abroad programs (around two weeks in duration), raise the important questions, "how much meaningful academic and cultural learning can take place in a 4-week period as students surf and snorkel their way in groups along Australia's Gold Coast, listening to their American professor lecture on a bus, and

stopping to pet kangaroos at the next wildlife refuge? At what point does the faculty director's claim to academic freedom prove inadequate to mask a lightweight program that could do more damage to the institution's reputation than not offering the program at all?" (367). Additionally, Brockington and Wiedenhoeft (2009) note, "If a study abroad program is to foster global citizenship… there needs to be a curricular intervention or program structure that will lead students past superficial contact with the host culture into a deeper, more meaningful cultural experience" (123).

Conversely, Williams (2005) argues that no matter the form study abroad programs take, they do by their very nature provide students with opportunities to immerse themselves in another culture, constantly learn by doing, and interact with people of the local culture (358). Young (2008) also finds that "a different kind of learning occurs in a study abroad program than on the home campus… the process of social interaction is expanded, emphasizing the role of social integration in study abroad experiences" (94). The opportunities afforded students in study abroad programs give the programs intrinsic value as a vital part of the higher education experience.

Of course, the very definition of what is actually valuable about education varies depending on whom you ask. The literature tends to take a rather utilitarian view of education; most authors seem to be largely concerned with presenting quantitative benefits of studying abroad, with the exceptions of Nolan (2009) and Brockington and Wiedenhoeft (2009). The 2009 and 2010 editions of Open Doors, an annual report published by the New York City-based Institute of International Education, both focus heavily on the importance of international education experience for American graduates

to succeed in the global workforce (Bhandari 2009, IIE 2010). Opper (1991), too, focuses on the edge given to potential employees with a background of international experience as part of the college education. "The study abroad experience signals that the person is able to take initiative and to adapt to an unfamiliar environment" (Opper 1991). The prevailing conclusion seems to be that what is good about study abroad is that it provides valuable skills and qualities that employers look for in the hiring process, such as intercultural communication skills (Kitsankas 2004, Williams 2005), adaptability, and a deeper understanding of a foreign culture. If education is seen as having the end of future employment, then in this sense an academic term abroad is a beneficial addition to the college education.

Another, albeit perhaps less prevalent, "tangible" result of study abroad is a higher retention rate for students who have participated in a study abroad program in their collegiate careers as compared to students who had not. Using a sample from the University of Dallas, where more than 80% of undergraduates participate in the "Rome Program," Young (2008) found that the percentage of students who graduated within four years was higher for students who participated in the program than for those who did not. This seems to suggest that participant students were generally happier or more satisfied with the education they received at the University of Dallas, or at least were more dedicated to finishing their degrees in four years, than were non-participant students. Hereafter, I will define qualitative measures like general feelings of happiness and satisfaction gained from studying abroad as "personal growth factors."

Personal growth factors are qualities students gain and refine from being abroad that are not marketable in the same way that demonstrable skills are, but they are equally, if not more, important. According to Kitsantas (2004), "Several studies focusing on study abroad outcomes have provided evidence that study abroad programs enhance students' worldview (Carlson & Widman, 1988), global perspective (McCabe, 1994), cross-cultural effectiveness (Kitsantas & Meyers, 2002), interest in travel, art, foreign languages, history, and architecture (Carsello & Creaser, 1976), and increase reflective thought, self reliance, self confidence and personal well being (Kuh & Kaufman, 1984)." Nolan (2009) places these types of immaterial gains under the umbrella term "global competence," and he also includes qualities that he describes as "applying a specialty," namely "knowledge of global events and affairs," "attitudes of tolerance, curiousity, and openness," and "skills at working and learning across cultures" (268).

Business vs. Liberal Arts Perspectives

Perhaps not surprisingly, the literature suggests that business students often found their study abroad experiences to be most beneficial to them, not students of the liberal arts or social sciences, the usual champions of international education programs (Opper 1991, Orahood, Woolf, and Kruze 2008). This is probably a reflection of the differing views discussed above of what is important and valuable about education. Business students often reap tangible rewards from studying abroad in their academic and professional careers, in addition to the personal growth factors, which gives them greater satisfaction

than liberal arts and social sciences students for whom the tangible outcomes are not as profound.

Nevertheless, global competence is a necessary attribute for a global citizen and certainly for a global leader. Many higher education institutions across the United States, large and small, have included something about global citizenship, global leadership, or intercultural competence in their mission statements, indicating that they would like to graduate students who exemplify such qualities (Brockington and Wiedenhoeft 2009, Dolby 2008). The idea of citizenship for American students is extremely nation-centric compared to students from the rest of the world (Dolby 2008), and it is often difficult for American students to understand world issues that do not directly relate to the United States (Nolan 2009). It is important, therefore, that students – especially Americans, because of the general centrality of America in world affairs (Dolby) – regardless of their major program of study, improve their global competence to become better equipped to live meaningfully in the world.

Since the ability to live meaningfully as a global citizen is a long-professed aim of liberal arts education, it is only natural that international experience be considered a necessary part of the liberal arts curriculum (Brockington and Wiedenhoeft 2009, Young 2008). In the liberal arts there is a tremendous emphasis on personal growth and interpersonal acuity, and both of those are undoubtedly fostered by international education experience (Brockington and Wiedenhoeft 2009, Nolan 2009). "The liberal arts have a long tradition of preparing graduates for citizenship," write Brockington and Wiedenhoeft. "Increasingly, liberal art colleges are adding experiential opportunities to

their curriculum, acknowledging that a whole-person education necessarily takes place within a whole-world context" (117). Prudential University, a liberal arts college in a major New England city, slathers the mantra "Transform yourself, transform society," on every publication and web page it produces. For students to transform themselves and be equipped to transform society, global competence is absolutely necessary, and thus international experience is equally necessary.

It is valid to question, however, the extent to which study abroad experience is really responsible for maturation, transformation, and personal growth, and the extent to which it is naturally occurring over the standard four-year college period. Williams (2005) concludes that "exposure to various cultures is the best predictor of intercultural communication skills.... Although the students who studied abroad may have had greater opportunity for such experiences, the study abroad experience alone was not the major predictor of total intercultural communication skills" (369). Simply because Williams' study was inconclusive, however, is not enough reason to discount international experience, which certainly is an important and valuable part of a complete education.

Systemic Barriers

Unfortunately, international experience is not yet a required part of the curriculum at most American institutions. There are many barriers, both personal and institutional, that students face during the process of deciding and applying to study abroad. A student's ability to study abroad may depend on his or her ability to pay for the

program, his or her ability to take time off from the home institution according to school policy, or his or her academic year or course of study (Nolan 2009). As Nolan (2009) notes, many degree programs, mostly the sciences and engineering, are very rigorous and oftentimes there is not room in the students' schedules to go abroad (270). Furthermore, faculty and administration are both often reluctant to acknowledge the necessity of international experience as a part of a complete education (270-271). "It is a fact, of course, that on most of our campuses, study abroad costs more, and it is also a fact that many students are heavily indebted and strapped for cash. It's also true that a significant number of our students have obligations, such as families and jobs that preclude overseas sojourns" (270).

Barriers and difficulties vary from college to college. Perhaps the most obvious barrier is the financial one; often it costs more for a student to study abroad than it does for him or her to continue regular study at the home school. Other institutional variables, like core curriculum requirements and major social or academic events, may deter or preclude students from spending a semester abroad. At a college where students traditionally graduate in four years, senior students will probably be less likely to study abroad because they may feel alienated from their classmates if they miss out on popular senior year social events. At a school where core curriculum requirements or academic major requirements are strict and numerous, it may be difficult or impossible for a student to study abroad if he or she cannot fulfill the core requirements away from the home institution.

A cursory analysis of three of New England's private institutions that offer students the option to study abroad reveals the nature of the differences in institutional barriers. Byron College, a private college in southern New England known for its business and management programs, in which many of its students are enrolled, lists 80 different options on its Study Abroad Office website (an "option" here is defined as a destination or a program; so Sydney via Arcadia University and Sydney via IFSA-Butler are two different options). Byron's options are available to sophomores, juniors, and seniors, but none of the options are through Byron itself. Saunders University, a small, private, liberal arts college located in a small coastal town offers exchange programs to six countries including Japan and Greece, both nontraditional destinations, and affiliates with 32 other program sponsors offering destinations on five continents. Prudential University, a liberal arts college with extensive uniform core requirements for freshmen and sophomores, offers close to two hundred options for junior and senior students, but with the exception of a theological and religious studies program in Rome that is very newly opened, all the options are offered through other providers.

In addition to the institutional barriers, there are other variables in international experience which can drastically alter what students take away from the experience. Perhaps the most dramatic of these are term length and destination, the combination of which will determine the depth of students' immersion and ultimately the quality of their learning. As Chieffo and Griffiths (2009) point out, short-term study abroad programs have come under some scrutiny in recent years (367), even as the number of students participating in programs of around two to four weeks is rising quickly, and short-term

programs now enroll the largest percentage of students among all durations (short-term, semester-long, and year-long) (Bhandari 2010). A large portion of the literature addresses the question of term length (Bhandari 2009 and 2010, Chieffo and Griffiths 2009, Dolby 2008, Dwyer 2004, Kehl 2008, Kitsantas 2004, Nolan 2009, Opper 1991, Williams 2005, Zemach-Bersin 2008), and it is largely determined that students who study abroad for a longer period of time (semester or full-year) generally experience more personal growth, gain better intercultural communication skills, and refine more solidly their notions of identity (Dolby 2008).

The other highly influential variable is destination, which encompasses language use (English or a foreign language) and living style (dormitory, home stay, or apartment). It is widely known that total immersion is a very effective way to increase foreign language proficiency. Kitsantas (2004) and Williams (2005) find that students who study abroad generally show greater increases in intercultural communication skills than those who do not. The literature does not address in any depth the merits of different living situations, but home stay situations are generally more fully language-immersive than dormitory style or personal apartment living situations.

Conclusions from the Literature

Study abroad is an intrinsically valuable part of the higher education experience. Although program type, duration, and destination heavily influence the quality of learning during an international experience, the experience by its nature provides

students with opportunities both for tremendous personal growth and for professionally applicable experience. Study abroad is also consistent with the qualities of a liberal arts education, contributing to students' knowledge of the world, intercultural communication skills, sense of global citizenship, and potential for global leadership. It is important for faculty and administrators at American institutions of higher education to acknowledge and embrace the value of international experience and make it a more important part of and more central focus of the higher education experience in general. Only Dolby (2008) gives any significant attention to how international experience affects students' notions of personal and national identity, self and global citizenship, so further research may be needed in this area.

METHODOLOGY

My main method of data collection was conducting interviews. I wanted to be able to talk to people face to face for a substantial period of time so I could take in all the nuances of their speech and see their body language – things a written survey cannot accomplish. Shifting in their chairs, hesitation after a question, smiling when recounting a story, excitement or frustration in their tones; these actions give added meaning to people's words. Interviewing allowed me to get a more complete picture. It also gave people a lot more freedom to speak about what they wanted instead of feeling constrained to answering a question on a page. And, as I had already known from personal experience, people love to talk about studying abroad.

Usually after a short prompt people would try to answer the question as well as they could, and then they would give a small remark that sounded like it could be the beginning of a story, but they would stop themselves because they may have thought it was off-topic. At that point, I would often ask "what was that like?" or say "tell me more" or something to get them to expound on it. Oftentimes I would be forced to jump around my list of questions because people would start to talk about something that I wanted to cover without me prompting them, and they would answer the question before I could ask it. After a few interviews when this happened and I got a little lost trying not to ask a question they had already answered, I made a checklist at the top of my notes of everything I wanted to hit for when the interview started to stray from my list of

questions. I would check items off as we discussed them, and by the end of the interview if we hadn't covered everything, I would ask a formal question.

Interviews were good for me in that way too because people offered up a lot of information that they may not have otherwise given me on a written survey if I weren't sitting right there next to them projecting an air of calm and casualness (at least that's the vibe I tried to radiate). I had to adapt my questions to what they were saying, and I was free to add questions on the fly if something popped up that I hadn't thought of. I tried to lead by example and make them feel like they could talk freely about anything they wanted if they felt like they wanted to say it, using any language they wanted if it would help them get their point across. If I was recording the interview on my Apple computer's Garageband program – which I did for all but one of my interviews, when the interviewee declined to consent – I tried to take minimal notes so I wouldn't appear distracted, and oftentimes instead of writing phrases I would simply look at the computer and write down the minute marker when my thought occurred so I could go back to it later.

In total, I interviewed eight students from Prudential and conducted a group interview with five of them. It was easy for me to find Prudential students and convince them to talk to me because my home is nearby the college's campus. I also interviewed study abroad staff and/or advisers from each of the three schools I included in this comparison.

Despite my preference for interviewing, I chose only to obtain information via email surveys from non-Prudential students. After thorough consideration I hypothesized that I would not get a favorable response if I asked students to sit down with me and

allow me to interview them. There were a number of reasons for this: these students didn't have any reason to help me other than general goodwill, and they were most likely very busy, as students often are, and they may well have been unable to find the time to coordinate an interview even if they wanted to. I was also extremely busy, more so than I had ever been, and I thought it would be difficult for me to find the time for so many interviews, taking into account travel time and my other commitments.

With Byron students it was easy for me to get in contact by e-mail, because the school has a public web page listing more than fifty students who have studied abroad and volunteered their contact information for people who want to talk to them about it. I composed a questionnaire of sorts with seventeen questions and included it in a short email introducing myself and my intentions, saying how I got their contact information, and asking for anything they could spare the time to give me, complete sentences not required. I tried to sound fashionably desperate, but not pushy. I sent out the email to eleven Byron students, personalizing each one, and received five responses of varying depth and quality. The seventeenth question, *How would you say studying abroad affected you as a person, if at all? Do you believe it is valuable and important for students to have this type of experience?* elicited the longest and most thoughtful responses, without exception.

I chose which Byron students to contact based on where they studied abroad, which is how they were divided up on the web page. I picked five students who went to traditional study abroad locations – two Australia, two England, and one France – and six who went to nontraditional locations – Prague, Buenos Aires, Brazil, Costa Rica, South

Africa, and Greece. Responses came from two traditional locations and three nontraditional. This is generally what I was aiming for, since I was operating under the assumption that nontraditional destinations might be more difficult for students to access and therefore students who chose them might have more new, constructive feedback for the study abroad office.

For Saunders students, it was a little more complicated. Saunders doesn't have the type of returnee contact program that Byron has, and when I interviewed the head study abroad adviser at Saunders, she was reluctant to give me student contact information. Short of roving around the Saunders campus for a few hours asking strangers whether or not they had studied abroad and would be willing to talk to me, I wasn't sure what else I could do to get in touch with them. The adviser, Kelsey Rubin, did give me the names of two students whom she contacted later and said had agreed to talk to me, but when I emailed them with an adapted version of the survey I had sent Byron students, only one responded, and she wasn't exactly in my target demographic. She was a student assistant in the study abroad office, but she hadn't actually studied abroad at Saunders; she had spent time abroad doing charity work on her own, and indeed she knew a lot about the study abroad process at Saunders because she had spent three semesters working in the office, but my questions weren't tailored for her, and some of her responses reflected that. The other student never returned my emails, and I made sure I had the correct address. I suppose I could claim to have had a 50% response rate, which is quite high and sounds impressive, but that would make me feel cheap, and I try to avoid feeling cheap unless I really have to.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS – Outlining Ideal Conditions for Study Abroad

In this section I will outline a model for what an ideal study abroad office and study abroad process at an American university should look like, based on my research of relevant literature, as well as qualitative data collected from interviews and questionnaires of both students and study abroad advisers and staff at three private New England universities. I will divide it into five subsections reflecting the chronological order of a student's entire experience with study abroad, from when the thought of leaving first enters his or her head all the way until when he or she returns to school in the United States and reenters the American higher education system. Here goes.

Deciding to go Abroad

"Study abroad is the new college," pondered one adviser with whom I spoke. "It used to be that college was the time when you leave the nest, get away from home, and become independent, but all that has changed in the last ten to fifteen years. Now kids can stay close to home without really being close to home, thanks to Facebook and the Internet and everything. Especially at a place like [this] where everyone is kind of from not too far away, a couple hours, and they can go home really any time they want, so that independence doesn't really happen if mom and dad can still solve all your problems. Now when you study abroad it's more like the first time you really leave and get out there

on your own and learn on your own and gain that freedom and independence, and you can grow as a person."

Students that I spoke with seem to agree with this sentiment. Almost all of them knew they wanted to study abroad in college when they were still in high school. For many of them, studying abroad factored into their decision about which college to attend. If they didn't examine and decide which school had the best options, they at least made sure it offered the option to go abroad. "For me it was just part of going to college," said one student. "You go to college, you go abroad. It was always going to happen."

Some colleges have already adopted proactive policies to improve their study abroad personas because they recognize that many prospective students find it important, and a strong study abroad office can be a very valuable recruiting tool, especially in niche markets where schools tend to compete against other schools with similar campuses, similar mission statements and similar curricula. For students deciding between rival colleges, study abroad can be the thing that pushes them fully to one side of the fence.

One way for colleges to make sure students and visitors know about their study abroad options is to increase visibility for the study abroad office and for study abroad programs. If the office is marked by a nondescript door placard in the middle of a hall on the third floor a building on the edge of campus, it is obviously not as visible as if it is in the center of campus in a highly trafficked area, marked by colorful posters in the windows and international flags flying outside.

Of course, it isn't always viable to situate the office so ideally, so schools must also make other efforts to increase student awareness like advertising on campus and sponsoring events. For example, students will read anything they see while they wait in the lunch line, so why not put a bright, colorful poster encouraging students to consider studying abroad on a bulletin board in the main cafeteria? Perhaps the office could co-sponsor an event with the international or multicultural students' organization on campus. Offer college kids a lot of free food, and they will flock en masse to the venue, rain or shine, often without even knowing what the event is for. This is perfect for attracting students who haven't considered the option of studying abroad. Most students who do it have pretty much always known they've wanted to do it; the target demographic for advertisements is the student who hasn't given it much thought.

The other surefire way to increase student awareness and raise interest is to hold a large, flashy study abroad fair, preferably in a highly trafficked, central location. Mass emails can only do so much; most students will open them, gloss over them, and delete them. A bright, loud, physical display where the office can present information to students easily, informally, and in large numbers can leave a good lasting impression. This is especially important for first and second year students, who are still finding their niche in college life, for the most part open to trying anything to meet people and make friends. Catch them while they're young, and when it comes time for them to consider studying abroad as a junior or senior, they'll remember the study abroad fair they attended, and maybe they'll drop by the office.

Even more important than visibility when it comes to having a successful presence on campus is accessibility. The study abroad office needs to be open for students to drop by at their leisure, and someone needs to be available to talk to them and be friendly and helpful. Usually a student isn't going to call to find out the office's hours or make an appointment, he or she will just assume it's open during normal business hours and stop by. Often the student won't have anything specific in mind to talk about, just a general interest in studying abroad, and what can he or she learn right here, right now about doing that? There needs to be information available for the student immediately, and someone to help explain it if the student has questions.

A study abroad office would also do well to be open to modes of communication that students utilize frequently, but that are typically shunned by administrators. Social media like Facebook and Twitter, as well as Instant Messenger and text messaging availability, can all strengthen and diversify a study abroad office's connection to students. Students may also feel more comfortable learning about the study abroad process through a medium with which they are familiar.

It may also be the case that the student won't go to the study abroad office itself first if he or she has an interest in studying abroad. Perhaps an academic adviser is the first person he or she will turn to. Too often, however, academic advisers don't know anything useful about studying abroad, especially in departments with more intensive core and major curricula whose students do not often stray from the home campus. A very useful and proactive step a study abroad office can take is to reach out to academic advisers and educate them on the process of studying abroad at their college or

university. If a student comes in for an advising appointment and asks about studying abroad, the adviser will be able to pull out a sheet of paper detailing all of the program and destination options available to students of X major, and what type of courses he or she should expect to take while abroad. If the academic adviser knows immediately what options are available to his or her advisees, their meetings can be much more productive.

Something a little different and perhaps a little more ambitious would be to have a designated country-specific academic adviser, knowledgeable about life in that country, whom all students who want to study in that country could visit to learn about what types of programs and courses are offered at international partner universities, to help them decide whether or not it is right for them.

In addition, because study abroad offices are, like all departments, understaffed and overworked at times, it would be useful to have a peer contact program in place so that interested students could bypass the study abroad office altogether and contact a study abroad alumnus directly to talk about his or her experience and decide what to do. This type of program would be extremely simple to create, and valuable for both prospective and returned students. Upon students' return from studying abroad, ask them to volunteer to be a part of the peer contact program, and post their contact information on the school's study abroad webpage or a Facebook page or something similar. Students can email, exchange further contact information, or meet on campus to talk. It's like having a bunch of extra employees in the study abroad office, all working for free. It would also give returned students a healthy outlet to talk about their experiences

abroad, which most students would jump at the chance to do, and which many students expressed to me is one of the areas they feel their college is lacking.

Pre-Departure

Once a student has made up his mind that he wants to study abroad, he will need to physically visit the study abroad office and speak with an adviser. This is a momentous moment for a study abroad adviser, because she has a student's entire future in her hands, and she may only get one chance to shape it as significantly as she is able to now. Ultimately, the goal of the study abroad office should be to minimize the amount of outside help a student feels he or she has to seek to be comfortable and ready to go abroad when they step on the plane.

Some students will think they know exactly what they want to do. They want to go to London because they like big cities, they speak English in London, and all their bros are going to the same place with the same program, so it's going to be an awesome time. This is very dangerous; a study abroad adviser must take great pains to undermine all of this student's assumptions about why he wants to go to London.

You like big cities you say? Well, Europe is full of those, and most of them are much more inexpensive than London, not to mention closer to the rest of mainland Europe, so you'll have more cheap travel options.

You want to speak English? Well, many people in Barcelona speak English, so you'll be comfortable there, but you'll also be surrounded by Spanish culture and can probably pick up enough of the Spanish language to help you in the future.

Oh yes, your bros are all going to London. Listen, one of the most thrilling things about studying abroad is being thrown into an entirely unfamiliar environment, surrounded by people you don't know, and learning to get by on your own. This is what makes you grow as a person and gives you skills you'll use for the rest of your life without even realizing it. If you go to London with all of your friends, you will cling to them like a baby to his mother. You'll have a harder time meeting people because they will perceive your group as too close to penetrate, and you won't want to meet them anyway because you'll already have friends. You'll be less likely to travel where *you* want to go and do what *you* want to do because you'll need the group's approval. Think about this, do it for *yourself,* and you can meet your friends back here in the States next semester.

Sometimes he won't budge, and he'll end up going to London with his bros anyway and never realizing what he missed out on. But in many cases a speech like that will change a student's mind. A good study abroad adviser is there to help a student explore his or her options, and usually there are a lot. She must draw out of a student exactly what he wants to get out of his international experience. The thrill of travel? Culture? Language immersion? Service? Internships? Resume building? Depending on what a student expects to get out of studying abroad, the adviser will be able to recommend different programs and destinations to fit the student's needs.

One student I interviewed wanted desperately to go to Scotland. She had traveled abroad extensively with her family in high school and college before actually studying abroad, and she was in love with the idea of Scotland. It was her dream destination. She walked into her first appointment with her study abroad adviser with Scotland in her sights, ready and raring to go, by whatever means necessary. She walked out a short time later with the paperwork in her hand to study in China, and never looked back. Her adviser gave her a speech something like the one above, informed her about her options, and convinced her to go to China instead of Scotland. She said her mother was thrilled.

Other students won't know what they want to do, they will just know they want to go abroad. With these students the adviser can have a similar discussion (Are you a city person? Are you comfortable with cold weather? Do you want to learn to speak another language? What are some types of experiences you think you want to have abroad?) Say the student is a history minor, she says she likes cities but not cold weather, she would like to improve her French, and she has always wanted to learn to surf, the adviser might recommend a language-intensive program in historic Marseilles, with a beautiful Mediterranean climate and easy access to beaches.

Simply asking questions of a student with a little bit of pushing and prodding can help to draw out what the student really wants without leading them to do something they aren't sure they're comfortable doing. Admittedly, going out of one's comfort zone is part of the definition of studying abroad, but there's a difference between excitement and anxiety, thrill and terror.

This is one of the most important duties of a study abroad adviser. Studying abroad itself is so life-changing, so defining, and so integral to who a student is as a person once he or she returns; the adviser must make sure the student is heading off to the right place for the right reasons. Most students need this kind of guidance to start their international experience off on the right foot.

A useful exercise an adviser can conduct with a student is to have them write a letter to themselves about what they expect from their experience abroad. Have them answer questions like "What do I want from my semester abroad? What am I looking forward to? What am I worried about? What am I hoping to achieve?" When the students return and read their letters, they can measure their experiences by the standards they set for themselves.

The other kind of guidance an adviser must be able to give is academic guidance. It is extremely helpful if a student has a four-year academic plan in mind before he goes abroad to ensure that he remains on track to receive his degree in time, assuming it's a four year institution. One of the biggest sources of frustration for students is having trouble with which courses they take abroad and how their credits transfer back to their home institution. Course pre-approval is something that students wanted to see implemented in schools where it wasn't already, so that students could be sure how and whether their credits taken abroad would transfer back to their home school.

Depending on the flexibility of the home institution's core curriculum and the flexibility of the student's major, the student may have very limited options about what he can take abroad, and the adviser should be knowledgeable about these things. This is

another reason it's helpful to pique students' interest in studying abroad early; they will be more likely to plan their course of study ahead of time if they know they want to go abroad. It's also the reason it would be helpful for the study abroad office to reach out to academic advisers to inform them about what options are generally available for the type of advisees they service.

Besides being privy to academic nuances involved with studying abroad, advisers should be able to explain generally the financial and housing situation for their home institution that a student will most likely face when he or she is abroad. At the very least, the adviser should be able to refer students to someone in a different department who can help them.

Furthermore, advisers need to be available to help students with the paperwork involved with studying abroad, including what is required from the program provider (if it isn't the home school), if the student feels he needs help. When I asked students from different schools whether they thought the paperwork they had to complete was normal for the process, they tended to reply that yes, they thought it was normal, but it was still burdensome and frustrating. Some parts of the process students can handle on their own just fine, but for others, like the extensive amount of paperwork, their advisers need to be there to assist them.

One more thing advisers should make sure of when a student is preparing to study abroad is that he or she knows a sufficient amount of information about the political and economic atmosphere in the destination country before arriving there. As students are often told, while they are abroad, they will be viewed as ambassadors, representatives,

and reflections of the United States, of their school, and of their family. They will be asked questions and be expected to speak on behalf of all Americans. Students tend to think before leaving that this warning is exaggerated; everybody knows that not all Americans are the same. How can they seriously expect one college student to speak representatively of a nation of 300 million diverse people? When students return, however, they tend to have realized that it isn't an exaggeration. People in other countries know America mostly by what they see on television and in the movies. When they meet real live Americans, they have lots of questions, and they walk away from the meeting thinking that what you have said is a reflection of American public opinion. It is important for students to be sensitive to the politics in the area in which they are living and to be prepared to encounter customs which may be unusual to them. They must behave sensitively and diplomatically, and advisers should stress this.

Pre-Departure Orientation

The Pre-Departure Orientation is the part of the pre-departure process that the students I talked to remembered the most. They were the most vocal about it, and they had many suggestions as to how they thought it could have been improved. Advisers would do well to note student suggestions in this area in particular, since it is the final formal contact they have with students before they are sent on their way to disperse around the globe.

First and foremost, it is *absolutely necessary* that a study abroad office hold a pre-departure orientation. This should be *mandatory* – the number-one priority for students. They should take the time off of work, they should be formally excused from conflicting classes, and only extremely extenuating circumstances should be accepted as an excuse for missing it. Nothing is more important before going abroad than this singular meeting. It gets students prepared to spend a term abroad; it is the final culmination of all their preparation up until this point, and it is the last strong impression they will have of their school taking care of them before they leave. Students remember this event.

Because it is a culmination of all their multifaceted preparation for departure, it is only fitting that the information presented to students be equally multifaceted. Orientation is mainly the study abroad office's responsibility, but is not only the study abroad office's responsibility. Other departments should be represented. Health services, safety and security, information technology, library services, student counseling, the bursar's office, financial aid, student conduct, academic advising, career services – all of these departments have valuable things to offer students before they leave.

In addition to providing students with a breadth of information from many different departments, the study abroad office must be sure to give students *frank, honest, helpful* information at orientation. Sex, drinking, and drug use happen. It absolutely detrimental to students to pretend that they don't. In fact, all three of these types of behavior tend to increase while students are abroad; immersed in an environment that is totally new and unfamiliar, students are tempted to try things that are new and unfamiliar, even knowing the risks of doing so. By no means is educating

students about the *facts* of sex, drinking, and drug use the same thing as encouraging that behavior. This does not mean just emphasizing the dangers; these students are adults and they should be treated as such, and the more informed they are, the better able they will be to make their own independent decisions, which incidentally is one of the common side effects of studying abroad.

Some other general, practical things that students would be better for knowing before they go abroad include information about bank accounts, cell phones, internet connections, food, and packing tips. What will ATM fees be like in the country the student is going to? Are there any local banks that waive or reimburse ATM fees worldwide? What kind of cell phone plan should students look into getting in their country? Are international plans from American carriers more economical? Is the internet connection in the destination country faster or slower than the student is used to? Is it spotty? Will they have access to their home school's online resources while abroad? How long should a student's family regularly expect to go without hearing from him or her? What types of food may be hard to find in the destination country? Should the student change his or her diet prior to leaving to prepare for a significant difference in country? What types of things should a student take with him, and what should he leave behind?

Many of these questions are better answered in a more country-specific setting, rather than in a large group of students who all have different destinations. It is extremely helpful if students can meet with other students who have already gone to and returned from the same place the student is about to go. The study abroad office should try to secure as many peers from as close to the destination as possible – from the same school,

the same city, the same country, or at the very least the same type of culture. Students that I talked to who arrived at their pre-departure orientation only to find that they were the first student from their school to ever go to China, or to Ghana, or to spend a semester at sea, left feeling shafted and disappointed. The study abroad adviser should take extra care to make arrangements for these types of students, if there are any. Are there international students at the school from one of those countries who could come and talk about what it's like to live there? Is there someone from a nearby school to whom they can reach out to learn more?

The study abroad advisers should be as hands-off as they can when they set up students with peer mentors. Once again, it is a valuable exercise for both parties when the returned students can talk to the departing students about their time abroad. Returned students are always looking for outlets to share their experiences. It is also important that the students talk about whatever they want. To reiterate, candid, honest information is important. Advisers may frown upon students talking to each other about where the cheapest place to buy alcohol is, or which bars are the best for which nights, but students are going to learn that information in country anyway, and if the goal of orientation is truly to prepare the departing students as fully as possible, this type of information should be included.

Especially when discussing safety, which it is important to do, advisers must tread a careful line between being honest with students and making them take their safety seriously, and making them take it so seriously that they feel afraid to leave their dormitory or host household when they're abroad. For example, avoid saying, "Always

carry pepper spray and never walk alone at night, because reported rapes are very high in this area, and rapists know how to spot a foreigner." Instead say, "It is always safer to travel in mixed groups no matter the time of day, but be especially cautious at night. Be aware of your surroundings, and always be prepared to defend yourself." Above all, students should leave their pre-departure orientation feeling well-prepared and excited to go abroad, not feeling scared, worried, or intimidated.

In Country

A student's contact with an adviser should not necessarily stop once the student leaves the United States and begins his or her term abroad. Although it is not the adviser's responsibility to keep track of the student, and it is not the student's responsibility to keep in contact with the home institution, there should still be a clear, easy channel of communication open between the student and the adviser should either party need to contact the other.

One source of frustration that was quite common among students I interviewed was the course registration process while abroad for the semester when the student was scheduled to return. The inability to meet with academic advisers face to face was a source of difficulty for students because sometimes they were still unsure how and whether their credits abroad would transfer to their home institution, because not all schools had a course pre-approval policy. Students felt that an email thread was an

insufficient mode of communication with their academic advisers about course registration and staying on track with their individual academic plans.

Students also expressed dissatisfaction with the registration process at their home college, since it did not sympathize with the inconveniences that time differences introduced. One student who was in Sydney, Australia, registered for his classes from an iPhone while he was at a bar, because the time difference for him meant that registration opened at 11pm, and he did not want to stay in and miss out on a night with his friends just to take a few minutes to select his classes. A student in Brazil was forced to register late because severe weather interrupted the internet connection in his town for a couple of days, and he was unable to enroll in some classes that he needed to complete his major until he returned to the United States months later and argued his case. A student in South Africa also had to register late because he had a test in class that began at the same time as his registration. Although he did not end up having any problems, he was unhappy that he was placed in that situation.

Some students suggested that there be a separate, earlier time for registration just for students who are abroad during any given term. Some suggested that pre-registration be allowed for all classes for students who are abroad. Neither of these are ideal because they elevate the students who are abroad and put the students who remained in the United States at a disadvantage in competing for roster spots in popular courses. One possible compromise is to pre-register students who are abroad for courses they are required to take for their major, as well as any other courses for which they can argue their case to the satisfaction of the academic adviser in charge of pre-registration, which

is generally an option for all students in any term at many schools. Leaving it up to the academic adviser's discretion is a little more fair than automatically pre-registering some students and not others simply because of where they are currently studying.

Upon Re-entry

As I have stated many times already, the biggest concern for students upon returning to the United States and reintegrating into their home school is a lack of effective avenues for them to share their experiences. In a group interview with Prudential students, one student voiced her concern that she always felt like a nuisance in her group of friends after she returned because she felt like the only things she had to say had to do with her experiences abroad, and she felt like her friends just didn't get it. This comment was met with resounding agreement from the other students in the group. When students return from abroad, they need outlets to express themselves and share their experiences.

Here is some more dialogue from the Prudential focus group:

"I feel like everyone who studies abroad is dying to talk about it, especially when you first come back, and there's no outlet for it. There's no outlet, and there needs to be, there really needs to be."

"Exactly! The office, the study abroad office even tells you, you're going to have reverse culture shock, you're going to want to talk about it, and people aren't going to want to hear it."

"And they don't do anything!"

"And they don't do anything for it."

"Yeah, okay, great. You identify a problem… What's the solution?"

"It's not even that. Just rent a room for us, and like, get us some food, and like, just let us talk. That's all we need to do, but like, do it for us."

"Because chances are, we're all going to have different experiences, but there's going to be overlap, and we're going to have things that we can be like, "Oh my god, I had such a similar experience to what you did, but this happened instead. We can do that for hours.*"*

"I mean, we're doing that right now."

"Exactly."

"It's like therapeutic to be able to talk about it, you know, because I feel like you come back and it has to be… it's very repressed. Like, 'No, you're back at Prudential now, you're going to only deal with Prudential things.' And it's like, "Wait a minute though, I just had this life-changing experience, and I'm not allowed to talk about it?"

If I hadn't stressed it enough before, hopefully this snippet makes it clear. Students love to talk about their experiences abroad, they want to talk about their experiences abroad, and they feel like they need to talk about their experiences abroad. To be fair, Prudential's study abroad office does offer a "Welcome Back Session" each semester.

Prudential's study abroad coordinator believes that the optional session is "self-selecting for students who are having a tough time" readjusting to life in America, but clearly there's a disconnect between the students' opinion and the adviser's on this point.

Overall, students overwhelmingly support fostering a community of study abroad alumni, to spend time together and share their experiences with people who they feel will understand. Perhaps instead of one optional meeting at the start of the semester, study abroad offices could host multiple events throughout the semester in case some students miss out on the first one. Follow the student's suggestion in the dialogue above: just rent a room, give them some food, and let them talk. Keep the adviser involvement to a minimum. Make the events open to all study abroad alumni, not just the immediately returned ones, because the desire to talk to like-minded people doesn't fade with time, and it's "therapeutic to be able to talk about it." Encourage these students to exchange contact information at these events, and most likely friendships will form and the students will begin to spontaneously mimic the event structure on their own in the future (in other words, they will begin to hang out with each other for fun). An informal show and tell might be a good idea; each student brings an item or a photograph from their time abroad to show others and help start conversations. The study abroad office could use these events to return to students the letters they wrote themselves before they left, if the office utilized that exercise. This would also be the time to recruit students for a peer to peer contact program.

CONCLUSIONS

While it is unfortunate that only one percent of all American college students study abroad during their college careers, it is significant to note that the total number of students departing each year is continually increasing, and it has been that way since the Institute for International Education began collecting data in 1985 (in 2008-09 the number shrank by 0.8%, but the overall trend is positive) (Bhandari 2010).

I believe it is evident from the literature and from my interviews with students and study abroad staff and advisers at three private New England universities that study abroad is indeed an indispensable part of higher education in the 21st century. If American students desire to become capable, informed, independent, empathetic, complete human beings, and if American universities desire to produce such people, study abroad needs to be more widely integrated into American higher education, and universities need to make it a priority to encourage study abroad and make it more widely and readily accessible to students.

Rather than criticize any of the institutions with whom I partnered for this study directly, I have outlined a general model for a study abroad office that is accessible, student-centered, and equipped to send students overseas who feel confident, eager, and ready, as well as to receive the same students upon their return with care and understanding to help them reintegrate successfully and foster a productive community with one another.

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**Omitted for the protection of pseudonyms are the study abroad web pages for Byron College, Prudential University, and Saunders University.*

Top 3 Destinations
Saunders- Italy, Australia, Spain
Prudential - Italy, Spain, Ireland
Byron - Spain, Australia, Italy

Available destinations listed online:
Prudential -
Africa/Middle East - Botswana, Cameroon, Ghana, Israel, Jordan, Kenya, Madagascar, Mali, Morocco, Niger, Oman, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda
Asia - China, India, Japan, Thailand, Vietnam
Oceania - Australia, New Zealand
Central and South America - Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru
Europe - Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Scotland, Spain, Switzerland

Saunders – (grouped by program, not grouped by region online) Hungary, Mexico, Poland, Qatar, Russia, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Fiji, Cuba, Portugal, Taiwan, Panama, Malta, Norway, Sweden, Australia, France, Greece, Ireland, Japan, Argentina, Costa Rica, Italy, Spain, Austria, Czech Republic, England, France, India, South Africa, Tanzania, China, Thailand, New Zealand, Chile, Brazil, DR, Ghana, Nicaragua, Peru, Germany, Morocco, Botswana, Scotland, Denmark, Netherlands

Byron -
Central/South America/Caribbean - Argentina, Bonaire, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, DR, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru
Africa/Middle East - Botswana, Ghana, Jordan, Morocco, Qatar, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Turkey, UAE
Asia/Oceania - Australia, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam
Europe - Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, England, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Scotland, Spain, Sweden, Wales

APPENDIX 2

Some very informal suggestions about what makes a good study abroad office, based on student feedback (basically an outline of pages numbered 23-41)

1. Deciding to go abroad
    - Valuable recruitment tool
    - Advertisements
    - Study abroad fair
    - Adviser accessibility
        - Open office hours
        - Texting, Instant Messaging, Facebook
    - Peer to peer contact program
    - Academic adviser involvement. Are there country-specific academic advisors? Do major advisers know what options students in their major generally have?
2. Pre-Departure
    - Ultimately want to minimize the amount of outside help a student has to seek
    - Initial adviser contact. Where do you want to go and why? Push students to have meaningful reasons (e.g. not just because their friends are going there). Create a four-year academic plan.
    - Finances
    - Housing
    - Paperwork
    - Course registration, according to four-year plan
    - Students must learn about their destination country
    - More adviser contact. Reflect on your reasons for going abroad. What do you want to get out of this experience? Letter to self.
3. Pre-Departure Orientation. Before you send students on their way….
    - Mandatory, no excuses. Number one priority.
    - Include many departments to address students. Health center, safety and security, information technology, library, counseling, bursar, financial aid, student conduct, academic advising, career services. All will have something valuable to say to these students.
    - Give helpful, frank information. Sex, drinking, and drug use happen, and tend to increase while abroad. Do not pretend they don't. By no means is educating students about a certain type of behavior the same as encouraging them to try it.
    - Packing tips. Sample general packing lists as well as destination-specific suggestions.

- Bank account information (how to avoid ATM fees for home bank, whether to open an account in country)
- Cell phone and internet information
- Safety. Be careful not to intimidate the students, but be honest. For example, avoid saying "Don't walk alone at night because reported rapes are very high in this area, and rapists know how to spot a foreigner." Instead say "It is always safer to travel in mixed groups no matter the time of day, but be especially cautious at night. Be aware of your surroundings and always be prepared to defend yourself."
- How to handle food shock
- Journaling and photography tips to help students preserve their memories

4. In Country
    - Help with course registration. Students cannot meet with academic advisers directly, and thus are at a disadvantage. Allow pre-registration for all of a student's courses while he or she is abroad? Reserve a separate, earlier block of time for registration specifically for students who are abroad? (since time differences and internet connection variations could make it inconvenient for a student to register at the same time as the rest of the students who are still in the United States)
    - Public blogging or journaling program?
    - Retain adviser accessibility. Be prompt returning emails, be thorough and concerned when answering questions.
5. Reentry and Reintegration
    - Hold multiple welcome back events throughout the semester in case students miss one. Open to all study abroad alumni, not just immediately returned ones. Students can meet other people who have had similar experiences. Give the students good free food, encourage them to talk and share stories, relate experiences. Encourage them to exchange contact information.
    - Return the students' letters to themselves
    - Present them with opportunities to be part of the peer to peer contact program