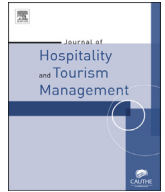




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The impact of experiential/hands-on international experiences on hospitality, event, and tourism students

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1. Introduction

International learning opportunities that provide students with global perspectives have become a mainstay in many university programs, especially programs that provide students with opportunities to gain skills in the hospitality, event, and tourism industry. However, although these global opportunities are becoming more desirable, measuring competencies and demonstrating effectiveness in programs that focus on serving and understanding international cultures have remained challenging, especially for short-term immersion programs. This research was designed as an exploratory study to measure the competencies of hospitality, event management, and tourism students; their development of skills while serving individuals from a variety of international cultures; and their knowledge of various cultures through an 18-day experiential learning project at a major international film festival held in Europe each spring.

Approximately 14 students from a university in the Midwestern United States comprised the sample in this exploratory study. The selected students were oriented to the learning objectives of the program. As part of the program, students were asked a series of open- and closed-ended pre- and postevent questions to assess their learning as well as their development of international culture competencies. Based on the analysis of the students' responses,

four specific themes pointing to personal growth were identified.

2. Background

There is an increased interest in students in the hospitality and tourism industry to gain international experience by studying abroad (He & Chen, 2010). A variety of methods have been employed to learn about the impact of these international learning experiences, which can range from several weeks to full semesters. Methods used to study the learning outcomes have included portfolios, journals, case studies, informal student feedback, end-of-course evaluations, individual interviews, focus groups, and surveys (Bosselman, Fernsten, Manning, & Kisseleff, 1989; Xie, 2004). A more recent assessment approach has used a combination of methods, including qualitative and quantitative techniques (Lusby & Bandaruk, 2010; Stemberger, 2009).

Researchers studying international experiences in the 1980s asserted that students in hospitality and tourism programs needed to develop cross-cultural knowledge to prepare for careers in the industry (Bosselman et al., 1989). Contemporary researchers who have focused on the topic of hospitality education have asserted that traditional study abroad programs continue to have a positive impact on cultural receptiveness, interest in learning languages, relevance to future job opportunities, and personal growth (Bosselman et al., 1989; Novelli & Burns, 2010; Van Hoof, 2005).

More recently, researchers focusing on hospitality and tourism have studied the motivational factors and barriers to participation and experiences gained in study abroad programs (Cardon, Marshall, & Poddar, 2011; He & Chen, 2010; Lusby & Bandaruk, 2010; Nyaupane, Paris, & Teye, 2011; Taylor & Rivera, 2010), as well as more specific challenges related to language barriers to communication (Mancini-Cross, Backman, & Baldwin, 2009). Data from such studies have led to improvements in study abroad practices for hospitality and tourism programs, including connectivity during the international experience between home institutions and students, preparation of students for the experience, management of overseas placements, and the design and marketing of successful study abroad experiences (Cardon et al., 2011; Gibson & Busby, 2009).

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However, there has been a paucity of research related to short-term international immersion experiences (Caldwell & Purtzer, 2015). Therefore, in light of the extant research, this exploratory study is significant because it targeted hospitality, event, and tourism students' perceptions of international cultures in a short-term immersion experience while providing the students and their accompanying instructors with insight to enhance these types of learning experiences. The results also provided clarity into the impact of intense, short-term experiential learning projects on the development of students' cultural awareness and competencies.

3. Purpose and objectives

The purpose of this study was to obtain initial insight into possible changes in attitudes of 14 students in a hospitality, event, and tourism program at a college in the Midwestern United States regarding international cultures, skill in serving international cultures, and knowledge of various cultures while participating in a major international film festival held in Europe each spring. In collaboration with staff at a country-specific pavilion located at the festival, the 14 students completed a short-term international field experience project. Hospitality, event, and tourism students coordinated functions, events, break-out conferences, and press panels while incorporating technology to provide services to meet the needs of a global clientele attending and participating in the festival. The pavilion at the film festival provided a unique international experience because the festival itself was located in an international setting and was attended by individuals from across the global community.

This international film festival is held each year in southern Europe. The festival is recognized as the most prestigious film festival in the world, attracting A-list celebrities, performers, directors, and cinematic staff. Select festival screenings are preceded by the famous red carpet entrance. The buying and selling of films takes place in the adjoining location, and the associated business of networking, business parties, press panels, and supporting activities take place in pavilions located directly on the beaches of the Mediterranean Sea.

Among the many pavilions represented at the film festival, the largest and most tech-savvy is the pavilion set up by the U.S. film industry, which is celebrating its 27th year of bringing professionals and emerging filmmakers together. The pavilion serves as a prominent fixture at the festival and serves as the epicenter for business, a hospitality and communications hub, and the center of activity for the thousands of U.S. citizens attending the festival. Inside the pavilion, members have access to an impressive array of facilities and services, including membership for the international film community, provocative and insightful programming, the Emerging Filmmaker Showcase, immersive student programs, and more.

4. Course description

Students who participated in the course went through an application and selection process. The process included face-to-face interviews at the department level with faculty, background check, and phone interviews with pavilion staff. The course comprised an overview of the theory and practices associated with managing festivals and special events in an international setting. This course also provided students with a comprehensive experience at an international film festival. Students applied theoretical concepts to an international film festival that allowed them to thoroughly understand the festival and events industry; the complexity of designing, delivering, and evaluating such experiences; and the application of a multiday events model.

Students participating in this program were expected to reflect upon and respond to specific learning objectives. To address and assess the learning outcomes upon completion of this field experience, students were expected to be able to meet the following objectives:

1. Explain the logistical considerations underlying successful service at an international event.
2. Analyze differences between international and domestic festivals and events.
3. Explain the cultural considerations necessary in providing event support.
4. Understand the development of policies and strategies in international festival management.
5. Assess the marketing, revenue management, registration, and retail operations of an international festival.
6. Observe global differences in management expectations.
7. Collaborate with event staff from a variety of cultural backgrounds in a fast-paced, multievent environment.
8. Understand cultural issues specific to facility management, safety and security, and film festival operations.
9. Use the study abroad experience to gain an understanding of the world in a larger context.
10. Demonstrate an ability to break down cultural stereotypes and create partnerships with people from other countries.
11. Recognize the event industry in a new context, that is, as a first-hand opportunity for the practical application of classroom knowledge.

5. Methods

Fourteen students participated in this short-term study abroad immersion experience and were asked questions pre-, during, and postexperience at the international film festival. An application was submitted to the university's office for research compliance, and approval was granted with the stipulation that the researcher, who also served as the faculty lead, would include a narrative in the course syllabus and provide the study abroad office with language that could be used on the portal. The consent form clarified that the research was separate from the study abroad program, and it specifically stated that a student's decision to participate or not participate would have no effect on the individual's relationship with or any benefits from being in the study abroad program.

The pre- and postexperience questions were developed and administered in a quantitative online questionnaire via SurveyMonkey prior to the students' departure from the United States. All students responded to the questions prior to engaging in the pre-trip discussions. Students were then e-mailed the postsurvey 1 week after the conclusion of the study abroad experience.

The importance-performance analysis (IPA) protocol was used as the methodological tool for this study. The IPA is a marketing research technique that involves the analysis of customers' attitudes toward main products or services. It has and has been applied in several markets, including the automotive, food, housing, education, and health care sectors; the hospitality industry; tourism; and others (Alexitch, Kobussen, & Stookey, 2004; Cunningham & Gaeth, 1989; Dolinsky, 1991; Go & Zhang, 2008; Hawes & Rao, 1985; Kitcharoen, 2004; Martilla & James, 1977; Sethna, 1982; Silva & Fernandes, 2010).

Martilla and James (1977) developed the IPA instrument as a way to learn more about participant satisfaction and expectations related to certain important attributes used to judge attribute performance. This technique assesses the importance and performance that participants place on specific attributes of a program.

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