



# Enhancing the study abroad experience: A longitudinal analysis of hospitality-oriented, study abroad program evaluations

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Eleven short-term study abroad program evaluations from 185 students were examined.
- Program evaluations included quantitative and qualitative responses.
- Content analysis revealed themes centered around logistics, culture, and pleasure.
- ANOVA results indicated greater satisfaction with active learning experiences.
- ANOVA results indicated preference for experiences led by authentic, local experts.

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## ABSTRACT

Research suggests numerous benefits associated with studying abroad. Given the increasingly global nature of the world, it would seem that there is a significant need for international exposure; however, only 1.4% of U.S. students have studied abroad. This study examined program evaluations from 11 short-term undergraduate study abroad programs encompassing a span of 9 years. A total of 185 participants completed the survey using evaluations designed for program improvement, which were collected at the conclusion of each experience. Data were examined using a mixed-methods approach with the goal of identifying programmatic characteristics that contributed to increased student satisfaction. Results indicated that students' preferences were prioritized in terms of logistics, culture, and pleasure. In addition, the engagement and source of experience significantly influenced students' satisfaction with their study abroad experience, implying that students prefer programs with active components and local guides. Findings were examined in light of Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the hallmarks of effective education is that it has a measurable impact on the student. Information and experiences provided by the instructor are designed to influence students' perceptions and understandings of the topic(s) at hand. However, the traditional educational experience can be somewhat limited when restricted to the classroom setting. Book, lecture, and multimedia delivery can only communicate a certain degree of information, oftentimes with limited effectiveness due to the abstract nature of the school-bound experience.

Conversely, studying abroad offers instructors the chance to take the classroom on the road – a chance to elaborate academic content with simultaneous real-world exposure. Also, as noted by Duke (2000), studying abroad offers the opportunity to apply a wide range of teaching techniques, thus accommodating students' varied learning styles. Integrating academic content with real-world exposure increases the material's relevance and subsequent internalization. Bodger, Bodger, and Frost (2006) asserted that the value of educational travel lies in studying topics in their context and environment. For example, it is one thing to lecture about Italian wines and wine making in a classroom using a textbook; imagine, however, the same lesson being taught while in a vineyard and winery in Tuscany, Italy; the difference lies in the immersion aspect. The lesson is the same, but the connection to reality, and therefore relevance, is greater. Some concepts that are difficult to explain in the abstract, for example terroir, could be easier for students to follow when immersed in the environment.

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The students could handle the soil, examine its composition, and get a feel for the vineyard's orientation or aspect in relation to the sun and wind – all aspects that contribute to the concept of terroir resulting in unique wine characteristics. Students are more likely to engage with, and reflect upon, content when they experience the material firsthand.

Study abroad offers many opportunities for “disorienting dilemmas,” experiences that, when paired with self-reflection, can cause learners to shift their frames of reference and embrace more inclusive perspectives in accordance with Mezirow's (1997) Transformative Learning Theory. Unfortunately, U.S. participation in study abroad programs is marginal at best; without participation, students miss the opportunity to engage in transformative global and cultural learning.

In order to improve participation rates, it is necessary to examine various program components, such as experiential, logistical, and educational, in order to determine student preferences in regards to study abroad experiences. Developing programs that generate positive student feedback will result in an increased desire to participate. Therefore, the goal of this study was to analyze a decade's worth of short-term study abroad program evaluations with the intention of providing guidance to future program developers and leaders. Additionally, given the increasing popularity of short term programs, growing from 14.4% of all study abroad programs in 2000/01 to 20.4% in 2010/11 (IIE, 2012a), examining the characteristics that contribute to student engagement and success during short term programs is warranted.

## 2. Review of the literature

### 2.1. Theoretical background

Personal engagement, relevance, and self-reflection lead to the development and refinement of personal frames of reference, the foundation of Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory. Transformative learning, according to Mezirow (1997), is the process of experiencing a change in a frame of reference, which he goes on to define as “the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences” (p.5). Transformations in a person's frames of reference are achieved through a critical examination of the factors that sustain close held assumptions. These assumptions lead to specific points of view. With regard to learning, Mezirow identifies four learning processes. The first involves elaborating or supporting initially held biases. The second is to establish a new point of view, while the third way is to transform an existing point of view from one perspective to another, distinctly different, perspective as a result of critical reflection and examination of misconceptions. Last and most difficult, people can “learn,” that is change, their point of view, by cultivating an awareness of their generalized biases (Mezirow, 1997). The third and fourth forms of learning are especially suited to the study abroad educational environment.

Hunter (2008) examined the Transformative Learning Theory in the context of studying abroad explaining that “change in perspective, based on examination of the premises, assumptions and presuppositions underlying the framework, results in a shift of paradigm” (p.96). A student undergoing a study abroad program may reinterpret their ways of thinking, feeling, and valuing as a result of experiencing some disorienting dilemma, a common occurrence in study abroad programs. Both Mezirow (1997) and Hunter (2008) emphasize the importance of critical reflection and discourse in effecting these changes in thinking. Study abroad experiences tend to offer greater transformational potential than a student would likely experience if they just stayed on campus (Hunter, 2008). Opportunities for experiencing disorienting dilemmas will vary based upon the program type.

### 2.2. Types of study abroad

Study abroad programs come in a variety of packages. From short-term, 1–3 week journeys to fifteen-week semesters abroad, there are many different types of programs. Following is a synopsis of the more common variations of study abroad programs.

**Educational Travel/Study Tours:** These programs are usually short-term programs of 1–4 weeks duration. Within this category are several subdivisions: the single location tour, the multi-location tour, and hybrid programs. Single location tours permit the student to become more familiar with an area and provide a more in-depth cultural experience (Brokaw, 1996). Multi-location tours move from place to place during the program and are of interest to those students who wish to experience several different cultures. Program content of multi-location tours often focuses on cultural issues (Gordon & Smith, 1992; Schuster, 1993). There is another form of study tour that combines elements of both single- and multi-location tours. This is where a home base is selected for the duration of the visit, with daily “field trips” to other locations within reasonable distance (Moncrief, Shipp, & Lamb, 1995). Finally, there are hybrid programs where short tours are combined with regular academic sessions held at the home school. Combining a domestic course with an international experience can enhance the internationalization of the material for better retention (Johnson & Mader, 1992). These programs are usually developed and managed by faculty from the home school.

Summer programs generally run for 6–8 weeks and involve working in collaboration with host schools. Oftentimes, these programs are led by faculty from the home school who accompany the students to the host school and utilize the host school's facilities to present standard course material in a novel setting. Frequent site visits are often incorporated into this form of study abroad program.

Semesters abroad represent an unescorted form of study abroad. Students enroll in courses, approved for credit by the home institution, at credit-granting schools in the host country. Participants in these courses are integrated with students from the host school and taught by the instructors of that school. This type of program often results in a more in-depth cultural immersion for the participant.

Internships, while not always a structured educational program, are still considered to be part of the study abroad scene. In this situation, participants are placed into structured work situations designed to provide valuable real-world experience in their field of study. These can be of variable length depending upon the needs of the host corporation. Progress in the internship experience is usually monitored through the use of journals and written reports. Toncar and Cudmore (2000) suggest that internships are gaining popularity as a form of experiential learning that bridges the gap between the classroom and real world application, while Trooboff, Vande Berg, and Rayman (2007) found that experiential programs, such as service learning or internships, were highly valued by potential employers.

Finally, while not directly a form of study abroad for the host school student, international exchange programs, where foreign students come to study in the U.S., are also a form of cultural interaction. Students who pursue studies in the U.S. bring aspects of their culture with them. Interactions with these students can heighten cultural awareness and encourage future travel on the part of the home school student.

### 2.3. Participation in study abroad

The nature of the study abroad experience is changing (NAFSA, 2003). According to the Institute of International Education,

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