Study Abroad Programs: A Golden Opportunity for Academic Library Engagement

by Kayo Denda

Study abroad programs in higher education increasingly play a major role in training students for global citizenship. This case study, conducted in a large research university in the United States, identifies the information needs of students and faculty in study abroad programs. Of particular interest is how awareness of library resources and services enrich students' study abroad experiences. This essay also looks at study abroad in terms of engagement, where the libraries could join with study abroad programs and develop a common vision.

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INTRODUCTION

Study abroad programs in higher education increasingly play a critical role in training students for global citizenship. Since the inception of the Fulbright program in 1946 and the formalization of study abroad programs for academic credit, different types of programs have emerged around the United States. According to the Institute of International Education, U.S. students studying abroad have increased more than twice in the last two decades.[1] Study abroad programs today offer innovative curricula beyond language acquisition and culture. Subject-specific courses ranging from the sciences to the humanities offered in different countries allow students to acquire new knowledge while embedded in local communities. The international experience can transform students' lives as they develop worthy skills in communication, critical thinking, self and social awareness, and sensitivity to cultural differences. Study abroad also helps students learn to function in other cultures across national boundaries, a skill that is important in our increasingly global society.

The expansion of study abroad programs represents one aspect of American universities' strategic focus on comprehensive internationalization, an emerging idea and commitment to international programming involving a range of activities transforming the university. Other initiatives toward this goal include attracting international students and scholars, building cross-border research collaborations, expanding foreign language learning, and increasing area and regional studies. Together they introduce a new framework for teaching, research and service missions of higher education. The global reconfiguration of economics, systems of trade, information and communication technologies, movements of people, and the impact of global forces on local life expand the need for comprehensive internationalization and the motivations driving it.[2] As society becomes more globally connected and as businesses require skills to work in a multinational and multicultural environment, these initiatives become more critical for America's competitiveness.

The study abroad program in this paper is broadly defined as short-term, formal, credit-bearing programs toward the completion of a degree taking place outside the country of the home institution. The length of the programs ranges from one semester to one year, or four or eight weeks in the summer. These programs are generally administered by the home university or college or a partner host institution, offered at a satellite campus of the home institution, or conducted at field stations or other facilities such as "Semester at Sea" at the University of Virginia.[3] Students in these programs have

research assignments that often emphasize disciplinary knowledge with an understanding of global systems grounded in local issues. These assignments often require sophisticated research skills and access to resources,[4] available through libraries at their host institution, or, through Internet access, from their home institution's digital collections and services. Electronic access presents an ideal opportunity for libraries at students' home institutions to develop innovative services that contribute directly to enriching the students' experiences abroad.

The goal of this paper is to determine the extent of current use of library resources by Rutgers study abroad programs, to assess study abroad students and faculty's awareness of library services available, and to identify opportunities for university libraries to collaborate with this particular community. This study also attempts to determine the role of academic libraries in support of their parent institution's growing global and international initiatives. During the first phase of this investigation, two groups met to gather information. The first group consisted of twenty-one individuals representing a convenience sample of Rutgers faculty, administrators and students involved in study abroad programs. The second group included four overseas resident directors visiting the campus to participate in an outbound student orientation. The second phase of this research consisted of a systematic search of Association of Research Libraries (ARL) member institutions to determine the suite of services offered to study abroad programs and how their libraries are handling this emerging user group via their websites, with a focus on changes in the nature of services offered since the 2008 ARL report on this topic. This brief survey of what other research universities are doing for study abroad programs suggests that the issues faced at Rutgers generalize to study abroad programs at many other universities around the nation. The paper concludes with a set of policy recommendations about how academic libraries can better serve needs of their study abroad community, by looking at study abroad in terms of engagement, where the libraries could join forces with study abroad programs, and develop a common vision.

Literature Review

In its 2010 report, *Strengthening Connections, Advancing Global Understanding,* the Institute of Museum and Library Services recognizes such cultural institutions as museums and libraries as increasingly significant players in advancing global and successful cross-cultural understanding.[5] As the number of students studying abroad steadily increases, the role of academic libraries engaged with this distinct and growing user population is inadequate, as represented in the library literature. In 2008, the ARL report *Library Support for Study Abroad* underscored the important role of libraries in the success of study abroad programs and indicated that in most cases the home institution library – not the host institution – should provide services to students and faculty in study abroad programs.[6] Although remote access to resources via a proxy server can ensure students the same access to digital collections and services that on-campus users enjoy, the report indicated that the most prominent challenge for libraries is the lack of awareness by study abroad students of their eligibility to continue receiving full library services while they are away. Even if students recognize that they can continue to use electronic resources from their home campus, they often face significant hurdles. Time zone differences can create an obstacle to IM chat or Skype reference and instruction unless they are provided at the home institution library on a 24/7 basis. Additionally, limited infrastructure such as electricity, hardware, software, and network connectivity at their host location can diminish a student's ability to connect to home library resources. Finally, restrictive Web use policies in some nations limit access to designated browsers and sites, thus blocking student access to home library resources in the United States.

Much of the extant literature on academic library support for study abroad programs focuses on the provision of reference and instruction that utilizes the Web and Internet capabilities. For example, at Champlain College, Sarah Faye Cohen and Andy Burkhardt describe the Skype based consultation services for students in study abroad programs.[7] The Dickinson College and Yale University libraries are among those that offer a dedicated online research guide featuring extensive information on off-campus access and practical advice, such as travel tips and country-related information, in order to assist outbound students prior to their departure and during their stay abroad.[8] At Dickinson, the librarians instituted a revised workflow in document delivery so that faculty and students have convenient access to both print and online collections regardless of their location.[9] It is likely that the success of such programs depends upon a pre-departure orientation session that insures that all outbound students are aware that they can use library resources remotely. It would also help if libraries create a position that supports students abroad, such as the appointment of a librarian with this specific set of responsibilities. This individual could then facilitate ongoing support and serve as a liaison to the office of study abroad.

One innovative example of library collaboration vis-à-vis study abroad programs is the digital scrapbooking project at University of Tennessee (UT).[10] By publishing a digital collection of photos and essays produced by students documenting different aspects of their study abroad experience, the UT Libraries are instrumental in promoting their study abroad program. At the same time, they are enabling engagement between students abroad with their campus cohorts while reinforcing the parent institution's international and intercultural commitments. This approach redefines the students as not only information users, but also information producers. It also redefines the role of the library as an active collaborator and enabler of new connections. With proper information organization, structure, and access, academic libraries can transform the students' individual experiences, personal accounts, and research into an easily accessible global information reservoir with numerous applications. Such efforts capture valuable information that will inspire future generations of study abroad students. They also foster a new model of an interconnected global and transnational system that positively promotes future study abroad programs, while simultaneously expanding the global reach of academic libraries.

The notion of study abroad students as information producers is echoed by Laurie Kutner in the context of expanding ways in which libraries can better support study abroad programs while facilitating preservation of data collected and resources generated by the programs.[11] This is relevant especially as more study abroad programs embrace international service learning where students in the program interface directly with their host communities. These programs are often located at non-traditional sites, away from university campuses, especially in the global south. Recognizing that research conducted by students is of direct relevance to their host communities, the project *Sustainable Futures and Globalization and Community Health* – a collaboration between SUNY Buffalo, SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, the University of Maryland, and the University of Illinois based at Monteverde Institute, Costa Rica – created a digital library providing access to local data, presentations, and reports generated by students. The digital collection is available through the Monteverde Institute Library Website, redefining the role of libraries and actively promoting public engagement. Another program based at the University of South Florida, the Globalization and Community Health Field School requires that students submit a final project in both English and Spanish so that the material is simultaneously valuable to the international research community, as well as to the host community, thereby broadening its impact.[12]

Libraries can also serve as catalysts in establishing new collaborations. Grisner and Herron, librarians at the University of Maryland, successfully connected the San Juan del Sur Library in Nicaragua with their home institution's College of Information Studies. Both librarians