

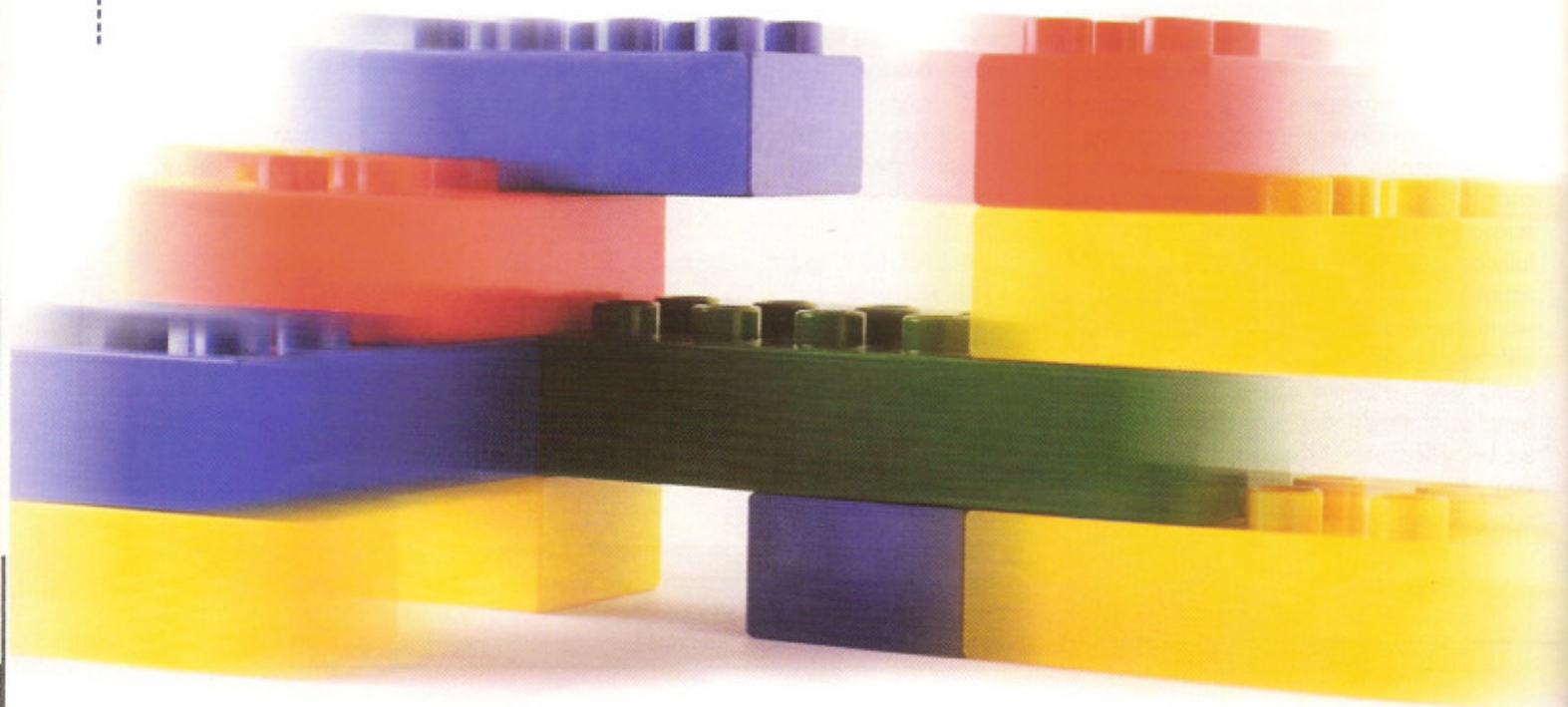
Short-Term Study Abroad It Makes a Difference!

By Lisa Chieffo and Lesa Griffiths

One institution compares hundreds of students who have participated in short-term programs abroad with their peers who remained on campus. Results of the study confirm long-held beliefs and reveal much about what students think they learn in a month.

To individuals involved in education abroad, there is no doubt that a sojourn overseas affords students opportunities for personal and academic growth that cannot be replicated on the home campus. Most administrators have heard enough stories from students about how study abroad "changed my life" that they feel justified in touting its benefits, even if there isn't much hard evidence to back up those claims.

In the large and diverse education abroad community, short-term programs in particular have often been the subject of ridicule, considered not academically rigorous enough and in some cases nothing more than "educational tours" (otherwise known as extended vacations). And yet, such programs have experienced a dramatic increase in student participation. IIE's *Open Doors 2003* report indicates that "most students continue to study abroad for shorter sojourns (many for less than eight weeks), with more than 50 percent of U.S. undergraduates and masters degree students electing summer, January term, internships, and other short-term programs instead of academic year or semester programs." Thus it makes administrative and pedagogical sense to take a closer look at the learning that is expected to take place during these short sojourns.



To this end, the staff in the University of Delaware's (UD) Center for International Studies (CFIS), with help from the Institutional Research and Planning Office, decided to investigate some of the impacts these programs are thought to have on students. Because UD offers approximately 50 month-long January and summer programs with more than 1,000 participants annually, the research team knew they had a sizeable pool on which to base a study. In addition, UD offers a five-week "winter session" on campus, during which thousands of undergraduates take courses; a subset of this population provided a convenient comparison group.

Methodology

The UD team then designed a one-page (front-and-back) anonymous survey in order to assess students' perceptions of their own attitudes and learning during the month-long winter term. The instrument was administered to students at the end of the term by their course instructors. Survey items were general enough to be applicable to students on dozens of diverse programs, and were worded in such a way as to be relevant both to students abroad and to those on campus. For example, students were asked to reflect on the past month and to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with statements such as, "I can explain some aspect of U.S. foreign policy to someone from another country." Other items asked students to recall how often they engaged in a particular activity (for example thinking about similarities between themselves and people in other countries). The survey also collected biographic data [gender, academic year, grade point average (GPA), and major] and asked students to comment on the most important thing they learned in the past month, either in or out of the classroom.

The on-campus comparison group consisted of students in courses that were identical or similar (in content and level) to those offered abroad. In the end, the project garnered responses from more than 600 students abroad (representing 32 different programs) and more than 400 on campus (from 32 sections of 22 courses).

It is not surprising that there were some notable demographic differences between the two samples. The abroad group contained a higher percentage of female students, a higher self-reported GPA, and more sophomores and juniors. Conversely, the on-campus group was more male, had an overall lower GPA, and contained more first-year students. In addition, students abroad were more likely to categorize their major as professional or pre-professional (for example business, engineering, or education), while the on-campus group contained a higher percentage of social science majors.

Even after statistically adjusting for these inequalities in gender, class, GPA, and major, significant differences appear between the responses of on- and off-campus students for 15 of 20 survey items. These results indicate that those who studied abroad perceived that they had greater cross-cultural sensitivity, improved functional knowledge in an international setting, and a better understanding of global interdependence than students who remained on campus. In addition, the students abroad reported engaging in international activities more often than their stay-at-home counterparts (for example reading an article about how Americans are viewed abroad or considering why



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other countries have a different perspective than the United States.) To those of us involved in short-term education abroad programs, these results are not surprising. And yet it is striking to have such a compelling confirmation of what many have suspected all along: that such programs do make a significant, positive impact on students in their development as internationally minded individuals.

Making a Phone Call to Another Country

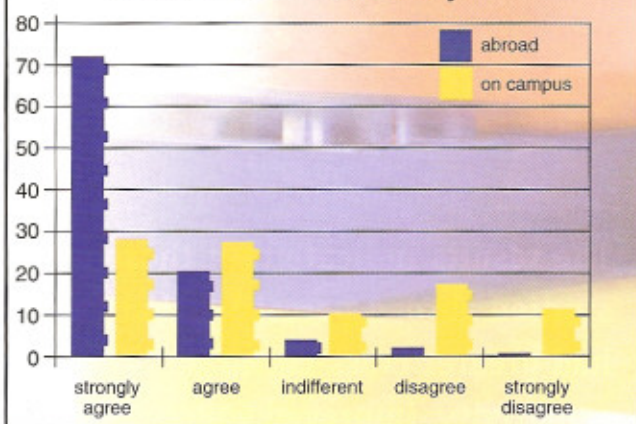
Let us take a closer look at the students' responses to some items in order to understand the disparity between the two groups. Students were asked the extent to which they agree with the statement, "I know how to make a phone call to someone in a different country." Responses were assigned the following point values: 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = indifferent, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree. Those abroad responded with a mean (average) score of 1.48 (about halfway between "strongly agree" and "agree," while the mean of those on campus was 2.44 (between "agree" and "indifferent"). This one-point difference may not appear to mean much, but when one examines the distribution of responses, the vast disparity in self-reported knowledge becomes apparent (see Table 1). More than 90 percent of the students abroad strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, compared to just over half of the students at home.

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Perhaps the response range described above is to be expected. After all, most students who go abroad probably phone home at least once during their program.

Table 1. Students responding to the question: "I know how to make a phone call to someone in a different country"

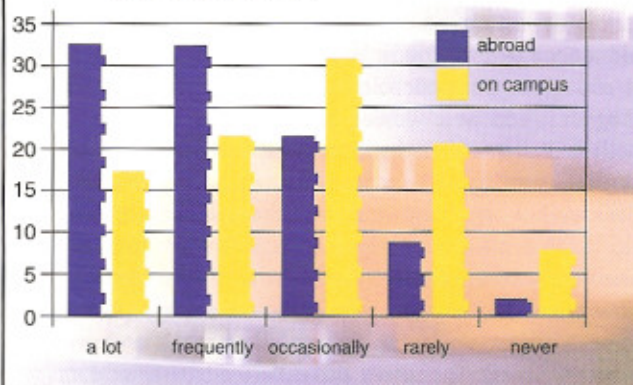


Different Perspectives on Global Issues

So let us examine a more substantive item, one that asked students to consider how often they thought about why other countries have a different perspective than the United States

on global issues. While the mean difference is significant (2.23 for the abroad group versus 2.90 for the on-campus group), the distribution of responses is more striking (see Table 2). About two-thirds of the students abroad responded that they think "frequently" or "a lot" about varying global perspectives, while almost the same number in the on-campus group consider such things only "occasionally," "rarely," or "never." (For the purposes of this survey, responses were defined as follows: a lot = more than 10, frequently = a couple times a week, and occasionally = about once a week). These

Table 2. Students responding to the question: "I thought about why other countries may have a different perspective than the U.S. on global issues such as agricultural production, trade, or the environment"



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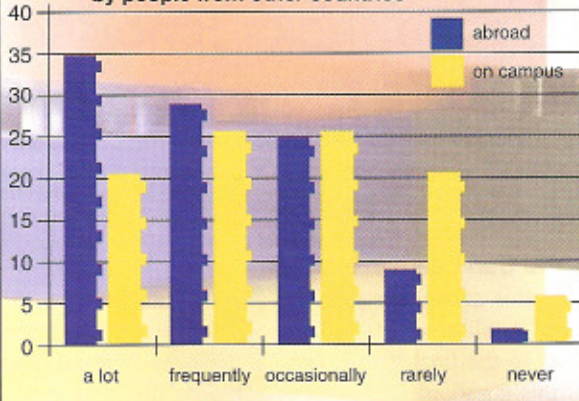
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responses, and those of similar survey items, indicate that, even after spending only one month abroad, students are more prone to consider multiple international perspectives than their peers who stay on campus.

Knowing How Americans Are Viewed Abroad

Another item asked students to recall how often they read an article, watched a TV show, or spoke to someone about how Americans are viewed by people from other countries. Given that the survey was administered in January of 2003, when debate about the impending war with Iraq dominated international discourse, one might anticipate that students on campus engaged in such activities with relative frequency. And, indeed, the data show that between 25 and 30 percent of students abroad and on campus responded to this item with "frequently" or "occasionally" (see Table 3). However, the true difference in their level of activity is apparent when one considers the extreme ends of the scale: 35 percent of the abroad group reported engaging in such pursuits "a lot," compared to only 21 percent of those on campus, while more than 25 percent of on-campus students "rarely" or "never" did such things during the period in question, versus only about 10% percent abroad. In short, during the 30-day term, students abroad engaged in a variety of international activity with a level of frequency far greater than those in the United States, even when such international pursuits were quite accessible on campus.

Table 3. Students responding to the question: "I read an article, watched a TV show, or spoke to someone about how Americans are viewed by people from other countries"



Developing a Greater Appreciation of the Arts

Another item of interest that deserves closer scrutiny is the one below, which asks students the extent to which they agree with the statement "I have recently developed a greater appreciation for the arts (in the form of buildings, paintings, literary works, etc.)." Again, the mean difference between the two groups is statistically significant, with the mean of the abroad group falling right around "agree" (1.91) and that of the campus group approaching "indifferent" (2.67) (see Table 4). And yet, the importance of this 0.8 discrepancy pales in

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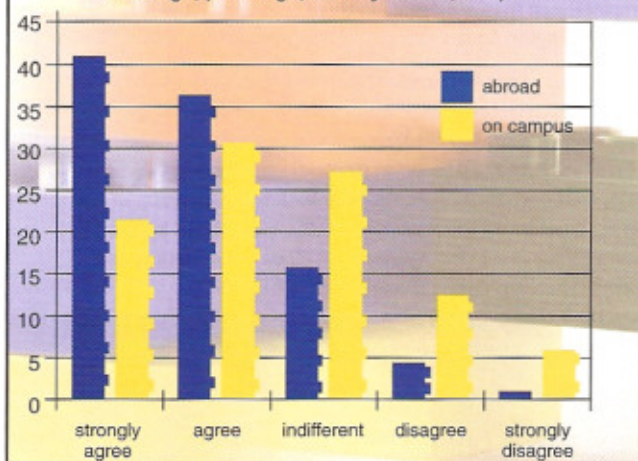
comparison to the range of responses. The students abroad agreed with this statement much more strongly than their peers at home (41 versus 21 percent), whereas the students on campus were much more likely to be indifferent or to flat out disagree with the statement. These differences in responses indicate that, while students on campus may indeed learn to appreciate the arts in a one-month period, those who go abroad do so with greater frequency and enthusiasm.

What You Can Learn in a Month

While this survey elicited primarily quantitative data, the wealth of qualitative information gleaned from students' responses to the final item is fascinating. They were asked to answer this question: "What do you think is the most important thing you have learned in the past month, either in or out of the classroom? (This may or may not pertain to international awareness.)" Perhaps the sheer volume of responses is most telling: the students abroad produced 100 percent more commentary than those on campus, even though that group was only about 50 percent larger. This suggests, if nothing else, that students had a lot to say about what they think they learned while abroad. Through an iterative process of analysis, the students' comments were organized into various categories according to topic, with labels such as "adaptability/flexibility," "cross-cultural understanding," and "American privilege" for example, if a student wrote that the most important thing learned in the past month was an appreciation of the comparably high standard of living in the United States, this comment was categorized as "American privilege."

It came as no surprise that the students' responses differed enormously depending on their location during the winter session. On-campus students were much more likely to refer to classroom content as the most important thing learned; nearly 42% of their comments fell into the "course-related knowledge" category. Students on campus also commented frequently that they learned about current events and about "life lessons" (for example the value of hard work). The abroad group, on the other hand, reported learn-

Table 4. Students responding to the question: "I have recently developed a greater appreciation for the arts (in the form of buildings, paintings, literary works, etc.)"



ing about a much broader array of categories, with many students revealing several important realizations instead of just one. In fact, the most frequent comment (characterized as "knowledge or appreciation of another country or culture") was made by only about 13 percent of the abroad group, indicating the vast diversity of learning experiences (see Table 5). While program administrators and faculty proudly display individual student comments on program publicity as evidence of the benefits of study abroad, one cannot deny the persuasive impact of hundreds of such comments as a testament to student learning.

Table 5. Students responding to the question: "What do you think is the most important thing you have learned in the past month, either in or out of the classroom? (This may or may not pertain to international awareness.)"

Category	% responses
Knowledge/appreciation of other country/culture	13
Tolerance/patience/understanding	8
Differences between home and host country	8
Acknowledgement of foreign views of U.S.	7
Course-related knowledge	7
Language/communication issues	7
Knowledge of self	6
Trip and travel-related	6

Conclusions

So, after analyzing more than 1,100 survey responses, what have the UD researchers determined? Based on the findings of this study, it seems evident that short-term study abroad programs, regardless of their structure or goals, have significant impact on the frequency with which students engage in international activities. In addition, results indicate that, compared to students taking similar courses on campus, those who go abroad report a greater level of global awareness and acquisition of internationally related knowledge. The UD research team believes that participation in one or more well run short-term education abroad programs can have considerable influence on a student's development as an internationally-minded individual and as a global citizen. Of course, this study raises at least as many questions as it answers. For example, how are students in different majors impacted by their experience abroad? How much lasting impact can a month-long program have? And how does students' perceived learning correlate with actual learning? Can one separate course-based learning from the acquisition of cross-cultural and adaptive skills? For the near future, the CFIS staff will continue to administer their existing instrument and gather data each January. Once enough baseline data have been amassed, the possibilities for further inquiry and collaboration are extensive. In the meantime, those who administer and direct short-term programs can continue to tout their benefits, confident that the facts are on their side.

The authors thank the University of Delaware faculty members who allowed their students to be surveyed; without their cooperation this project would not have been possible.

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