Study Abroad as an Academic Program:

Past, Present and Future

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I. Introduction

According to the omniscient Wikipedia, “studying abroad is the act of a student pursuing educational opportunities in a foreign country” (n.d.). Study abroad is not an extended vacation or a break from university studies. Those of us in academic affairs (should) know this is the case and (hopefully) educate people on the benefits of an overseas experience. Currently, thousands of students are participating in study abroad programs. However, many professionals, even those working directly with study abroad students, are not aware of the history of study abroad as an academic program.

One might think of the great world travelers of the seventeen and eighteen hundreds and call their experiences “studies abroad.” By literal definition of the term, that may be true. Study abroad does indeed imply that one has learned something while physically separated from their home country. Nevertheless, study abroad, as an academic endeavor complimenting an undergraduate or graduate degree program is a different concept altogether.

Through the course of time, study abroad has meant a great many things to a great many people. In fact, the actual meaning of study abroad continues to transform as events in the world unfold. The first event was triggered by the efforts of one man at the University of Delaware who christened study abroad as an academic program in 1924. Eighty-two years later, in the year 2006, China reported thirty-four universities with degree programs taught completely in English. Over eighty years of nation building, cultural and educational reciprocity, and two world wars have brought us to where we are today. Whether it be for language acquisition or volunteerism, degree completion or
cultural exposure; the act of studying overseas remains a meaningful and worthwhile experience.

II. Past Student Life

In the early decades of the twentieth century, study abroad became an established academic program at the University of Delaware and a recognized scholastic endeavor via early shipboard education. However, the human desire to learn from people far removed from our own culture pre-dates the academic institutionalization of study abroad by millennia. This desire is instinctual. We all recognize, even if tucked away deep in our unconscious minds, that we alone have not experienced every aspect of what it means to be human. Other people in distant lands have surely found different ways to live and understand their humanity. It is this awareness that other cultures define humanity based upon history (stories) and traditions (culture in practice) different from our own that sends us wandering in search of new wisdom. Therefore, in a sense, study abroad has existed since humans sprouted legs and began to walk the earth.

During the colonization of America, colonial colleges were established and young men obtained classical, English based educations from clergymen. The years of colonization were marked by countless hardships, and religious denominationalism provided a means for making sense out of it all. The colonial colleges primarily served the affluent, molding them into men of character ready for high society. Little was being done through the colleges to help develop the new country in a practical sense. So, it may come as no surprise, that many of the rich felt it was beneficial for their sons to be educated in Europe. “Seeing the Old World from the perspective of the new became an obsession for those with the means to travel” (Hoffa, 2007, p. 26).
Study abroad prior to the major reforms of the mid 1800’s only existed as a means for the rich to exercise their privilege by sending their sons to the prestigious institutions of the Old World. However, the reforms brought about major changes in the American education system. No longer were the colleges simply training the religious elite to become the new generation of religious elite. Rather, a college education became a creature of practicality. A new type of curriculum was beginning to take shape where students would learn the skills needed to graduate and help build the new America into what would eventually be a global superpower (Rudolph, 1990). Study abroad, during a time of new found nationalist spirit in America, was frowned upon.

"It is with indescribable regret, that I have seen the youth of the United States migrating to foreign countries, in order to acquire the higher branches of erudition ... a serious danger is encountered, by sending abroad among other political systems those, who have not well learned the value of their own" (Washington, 1785).

People finally came to understand that America needed an education system that was useful to the American people; and study abroad did not fit into this equation.

In the late 1800’s, when Jacksonian democracy had taken root, education was becoming available to the middle class, and a practical course of study finally replaced the classics; rich kids still were being sent overseas for a superior education (Rudolph, 1990). It wasn’t until institutions such as John’s Hopkins were established that America finally could keep students in the states to continue their professional programs rather than going to Europe. Trips abroad were not part of any college-organized study abroad program at that time. However, the President of Harvard, Charles William Eliot, was
establishing a new system that would finally make study abroad possible as part of an American university program (Hoffa, 2007).

The modular credit system, or electives system, created by Eliot at Harvard and supported by Henry Tappan and other reformers of the time, made it possible for course credits to be transferred between institutions, whether between domestic or international schools. By the end of the 1800’s, nearly all American colleges and universities subscribed to this system of electives as a replacement for the prescribed curriculum of the pre-civil war years. The classics had already been replaced by the new, practical curriculum of the reformers; and it was now transferable. This opened up a whole new era in the American education system, where students could pursue their chosen course of study at multiple institutions, culminating in a single degree within a four year period.

Unfortunately, it would be decades before the elective system would be employed in transferring coursework from overseas institutions. World War I halted most all study abroad and universities in general saw decreased enrollment as young men traded textbooks for uniforms and served in the military. However, during the years leading up to 1920, the elective system took root in most American universities.

The conclusion of the war resulted in large numbers of isolationists that felt America needed to stay out of the affairs of other countries. But the camaraderie between America and European nations was still strong and “many Americans still thought they needed to live and learn in Europe in order to be fully educated” (Hoffa, 2007, p. 62). Interesting to note is that 1919 saw approximately 7,100 foreign students studying in American colleges and universities (Hoffa, 2007, p. 67). Our continued relationship with many European countries coupled with the large number of foreign students in America
inspired a new belief that we needed to internationalize the degree programs in our universities.

An entirely new way of sending students abroad to study came about when programming took place in a few American institutions with the intent of “combining academic and experiential learning modes in a foreign setting” (Hoffa, 2007, p. 70). During the 1920’s, two distinct programs surfaced as the pioneering academic courses focused on study abroad: junior year abroad (JYA) and faculty-led study tour (ship-board education). What was new about these programs was that they were intended to connect with degree studies and complement the undergraduate academic program at home by reaching certain educational goals that were only possible via study at foreign institutions (Hoffa, 2007, p. 71).

**Junior Year Abroad**

Fully aware that America overall still held many isolationist fears as a result of the war, Raymond Kirkbride, at the University of Delaware, pitched his cross-cultural idea to the school president, Walter Hullihen, in 1921. Kirkbride presented a year long study abroad program for juniors that would “produce better-rounded students, train future foreign language teachers, and provide experience for students who wanted to go into careers with international aspects” (para. 3, “75th Anniversary,” n.d.). Although the president was committed to such a noble cause, the university was not prepared to provide financial support to such a venture. Therefore, president Hullihen and Kirkbride sought support from politicians and private individuals who would find value in supporting the youth of America studying overseas. Their efforts were successful, and
notable figures such as Herbert Hoover and Pierre du Pont endorsed and financially supported the program.

“On July 7, 1923, the first Delaware group sailed for France aboard the Rochambeau” (para. 5, “75th Anniversary,” n.d.). This historic departure marked the beginning of study abroad as an academic program officially recognized by an American university. It turns out that the experience was a huge success and word of the program spread across the nation’s universities and even appeared in the popular press. In fact, the program was such a success that students began transferring from other institutions across the nation to participated in the France program at University of Delaware. Eliot’s system of electives was now being implemented as students spent their junior year abroad and transferred credits back to their home institutions.

Quick on University of Delaware’s shirttails was Smith college. Seeing the success of the JYA, Smith sent their first group of students overseas in 1925. Smith had a large population of foreign language teachers, so sending these students abroad to study with native speakers was a logical programmatic goal. In the mid 1920’s, Smith saw 23% of their graduating students teaching foreign languages in secondary and private schools (Olmstead, 1987). Although Smith was first to mimic Delaware’s program, they would not be alone. Soon to follow were JYA programs at Marymount College, Rosary College, and Montclair Teachers College. Delaware then expanded their program in 1932 to include a study abroad experience in Germany, and soon after, Switzerland.

JYA programs were not without their flaws. First, students in the American university system of the 1920’s were not engaged in thorough foreign language coursework during their first two years. Therefore, most students sent to study abroad
lacked language proficiency. Second, partly as a result of the language barrier, and partly because overseas institutions didn’t know how to integrate American students properly, our juniors abroad were socially and academically set apart from their European peers. Third, programs were limited to nations with native languages in French, Spanish, German, and Italian (mostly due to the language proficiency of administrators establishing institutional agreements overseas). Finally, the programs attracted a disproportionate number of woman students (Hoffa, 2007, p. 83). Unfortunately, early attitudes toward men studying abroad were generally negative. It was believed that a year abroad would detract from the student’s progressive professional studies, thereby leaving him with less chance to achieve as a postgraduate.

*Faculty-Led Study Tour*

At the same time as the creation of the JYA, James Lough, at New York University, was developing a program where students would study abroad on a floating university. The Faculty-Led Study Tour was Lough’s creation, and it would become a recognized university program; later known as shipboard education (P. Watson, personal communication, November 12, 2007). Lough saw the early successes of study abroad programs that had recently sprung up across the nation and asked the question: “Why just Europe…why not the world?” (para. 9, “History of ISE,” n.d.). After garnering the support of financiers, Lough received a charter from NYU’s education department to operate as a university aboard a ship. Everything was ready to go; including the ship, faculty, and curriculum. However, too few students registered for the experience, which resulted in a failure to launch in September of 1925.
NYU made the decision to withdraw support of the program as a result of the 1925 incident. Lough took this as his cue to take leave from his employment with the school and divert his energies toward developing his organization, University Travel Association, Inc. (UTA), with full intentions of sailing again the following year. “Now that UTA was independent [of NYU] and no longer affiliated with any one college, other schools more freely provided their cooperation and support. Applications began pouring in from all across the country” (para. 16, “History of ISE,” n.d.). In fact, so many students applied that many had to be denied admission when the capacity of 504 was reached.

Lough is once quoted as saying: “This shall not be a mere sightseeing tour, but a college year of educational travel and systematic study: to develop an interest in foreign affairs, to train students to think in world terms, and to strengthen international understanding and good will” (Liebhardt, 1985). The maiden voyage of The Ryndam was on September 18, 1926. By all accounts, the floating university was a success and fully lived up to Lough’s aspirations in the preceding quote. The 1926 trip lasted 7 ½ months; sailed around the world, first stopping in Yokohama, Japan; was fully staffed, which included 33 faculty members; with a total of 504 students from 143 American colleges and universities. Students spent about half of their time on the ship and about half of the time off the ship at what would amount to ports in 35 different countries. There were four types of instruction during the trip: general lectures, recitations, field trips, and seminars for advanced students (Hoffa, 2007, p. 90).

Interesting to note is that the Faculty-Led Study Tour is almost in all ways different from the Junior Year Abroad Program. First, the shipboard program was not
sponsored by a single college or university. Second, it was not a full language and
culture immersion program. Third, it did not take place in a single country in Western
Europe. Fourth, students did not attend class with native students. Finally, shipboard
education was truly global in scope and intent, introducing students to the incredible
variance of cultures in the world, then synthesizing and reflecting on those lived
experiences in the classroom (Hoffa, 2007, p. 92). Where JYA was focused on depth of
cultural and language immersion, shipboard education encouraged breadth of experience
by introducing students to a smattering of cultures around the world.

III. Present Student Life

Once again, a World War essentially brought to a halt study abroad programs as
foreign countries experienced instability and college-aged American students joined the
military. After the war, an old national dialogue on isolationism versus interventionism
was born anew; the GI Bill was signed into effect, making it possible for our returning
military to attend school; and the United Nations was created. The United States of
America would now work with allied nations of the globe to achieve world peace. As
part of America’s new commitment to internationalization as a global superpower, the
government took part in the revival of international education.

Although the GI Bill introduced a whole new set of challenges and opportunities
to the collegiate community, it was the establishment of another program in the year after
the war that had the greatest affect on present-day study abroad. In 1946, the Fulbright
Program, which is still utilized today by many scholars, was enacted to support thousands
of graduate students and faculty who would study in other countries. The original
purpose was not to support undergraduate students directly. However, many of the
people who benefited from the program pursued careers in international education, so the program indirectly has had a huge effect on study abroad in the United States (Hoffa, 2007, p. 114).

Part of the reason for the government support of international education was that in the years after the war, America and its allies wanted to restore their education systems to something that they once resembled. New partnerships were being made between universities both domestic and international. Consequently, international outreach and diplomacy became a national priority. This resulted in a dramatic influx in students studying, as well as volunteering, abroad. “The expanded inflow and outflow of students and their need of information and guidance eventually resulted in the slow emergence of a new professional field known as ‘international educational exchange’” (Hoffa, 2007, p. 132). Now more than ever reciprocity between nations became the new mode of operation. This concept of reciprocity and exchange of educational resources is the foundation for exchange programs in operation to this day.

The end of America’s “splendid isolation” (Hoffa, 2007, p. 133) and beginning of institutional internationalization eventually would require some form of formal programming. Study abroad programming, in its current manifestation, can be traced back to the practices of many campuses across the nation in the late 1940’s to early 1960’s. While there was no question of the intrinsic value in sending students to study abroad, it was during this time that the study abroad program became a respected and formal part of a degree-seeking student's academic plan. “Study abroad programming was used either to bolster the general education aspect of degree studies or to intensify and extend coursework taken in conjunction with the academic major” (Hoffa, 2007, p.
Programming today continues to emphasize the importance of synthesizing the coursework taken abroad into a student’s degree program, whether those courses are used to meet core curriculum and/or major requirements.

Study abroad as a university program only exists due to the efforts of numerous individual colleges and universities, many of which adopted programmatic aspects from one another and learned from other’s mistakes. However, there are four not for profit organizations worth noting that have “both promoted and responded to the evolution of overseas education for American students and institutions” (Hoffa, 2007, p. 191). The Institute of International Education (IIE), established in 1919; United States National Student Association (USNSA, now USSA), established in 1947; the Council on Student Travel (CST, now CIEE), established in 1947; and the National Association of Foreign Student Advisors (NAFSA, Advisors has been replaced with Affairs), established in 1948, all continue to this day to provide support to students and faculty engaged in study abroad programs. In the early days of these organizations, the IEE and NAFSA focused their efforts on assisting foreign students on US campuses, while USNSA and CST supported American students engaged in travel abroad experiences. However, regardless of their initial intent, there is no question that the internationalization of American institutions would not have been as swift and sure without the assistance of these organizations (Hoffa, 2007, p. 192).

Study abroad programs continue to lure innumerable adventurous students from all walks of life who are interested in expanding their horizons. In fact, study abroad has become so integral to our educational system that the U.S. Senate issued a resolution designating 2006 as the Year of Study Abroad and published thirteen reasons why study
abroad programs are crucial to the success of our citizens and nation as a whole. The thirteen reasons highlight the benefits of contemporary study abroad, including: global literacy, values sharing, cultural awareness, regional specialization, foreign language acquisition, expanding personal interests, practical training, and an understanding of international affairs ("U.S. Senate," n.d.).

Current literature on study abroad emphasizes the importance of an overseas experience during a student’s collegiate career as providing an advantage in the job market. The rise of the internet and global communications and economies has increased the need for students who have participated in study abroad programs. “Employers are looking for graduates who can communicate well with others, both in person and in writing. They know the importance of cross-cultural understanding and an appreciation for different points of view” (Curran, 2007). The history of study abroad as a conduit of educational reciprocity between nations is still intact. However, the current rhetoric is being tailored to the individual student in innovative ways, thereby encouraging continued participation in study abroad programs.

In the last thirty years, study abroad programs have seen the greatest period of growth since inception over eighty years ago. As a result of such large student populations traveling internationally, recurring concerns have surfaced regarding the safety of students abroad. NAFSA’s Guide to Education Abroad clearly states that “your responsibility to your students is to ensure that they receive all the information and assistance they need and that they understand their own responsibility for maintaining their health and well-being” (Hoffa & Pearson, 1997, p. 217). The reasons that these issues of safety are hot topics right now are: first, more Americans than ever are studying
abroad in more study abroad programs, many in non-traditional sites; second, higher education in America is being held to broader standards of accountability than in the past; third, American society is more litigious than ever, with a penchant for lawsuits; and finally, advances in information technology have led students to believe they can be their own experts on the dangers in the world rather than relying on overseas partners (Stubbs, n.d.). It is critical to the safety of our students that well-trained and knowledgeable advisors are coordinating the countless study abroad programs available today.

IV. Future Student Life

The future of study abroad is largely dependent upon the stability, or lack thereof, of the global community. As seen throughout history, when instable conditions cause wars and relationships between countries are strained, study abroad is no longer a viable educational option. However, assuming we do not slip into a cataclysmic world war, participation in study abroad programs will continue to grow. As a result, new challenges and opportunities will arise. Each new overseas institution offering courses to international students will be accompanied by unique trials for advisors and students alike. Globalization, free trade agreements, instability in the Middle East, rapidly advancing information technologies, domestic security, and ever growing world populations are just a sample of factors that will impact study abroad programming.

In order to meet the challenges of maintaining stability in the world and address the need for experiential learning, many study abroad programmers are looking to service-learning for solutions. “Service-learning – the union of formal and/or structured study and learning with substantive community service – has demonstrated the powerful effect it can have on teaching and learning, on the educational process itself … it creates
what might be called an ecology of active learning” (Berry, n.d.). Universities throughout the world are just starting to realize the benefits of service-learning. They are witnessing culture and language being learned experientially, while civic and social issues are simultaneously encountered in real time. Volunteerism and experiential learning are not new concepts alone, but the union of the two as a programmatic element that spans the curriculum is new and warrants attention as a promising metamorphosis of study abroad in the future.

In addition to service-learning becoming more important over time, agreements with universities in third world countries will become more plentiful. Over two thirds of the world’s population inhabits regions of the world labeled third-world. Currently, a very small percentage of U.S. students study in such impoverished countries. “The impediments to increasing numbers seem to revolve primarily around lack of awareness of opportunities, lack of a tradition in study outside Europe, lack of sufficient home institution faculty and administration support, perceived additional cost, health and safety concerns, and parental nervousness” (Sommer, n.d.). We need to combat these negative views and encourage agreements with universities in struggling nations. Only by sending our students to learn in these countries can we ensure that we have informed cohorts of internationally educated decision-makers back home in America. Whether these students become international entrepreneurs or government officials, their knowledge of underrepresented, highly populated countries will be in high demand.

The English language, while not being the most spoken language in the world, is spoken by a large number of students who study abroad. As the number of institutions in the world continues to add academic programs in the English language, participation in
study abroad programs will increase correspondingly. China, a country that has historically seen a very small percentage of study abroad students, has seen tremendous growth in recent years, mostly due to the introduction of new curriculum taught in the English language (“U.S. Study Abroad,” 2005). According to China.org.cn, China currently has numerous degree programs taught in English at thirty-four of their universities (“English-taught,” 2006). Students will continue to consider non-English speaking countries as the number of programs taught in English at their institutions increase.

V. Conclusions, Implications for Further Study, Remaining Questions

Study abroad programs, as part of academic curriculum, are here to stay. Some might say it was only a matter of time before the wanderjahr of early travelers became part of a university degree program. However, without Charles Eliot’s modular credit system and dedicated visionaries like Raymond Kirkbride, study abroad would have been longer in the coming as a widely recognized academic program.

Today, thousands of students study abroad in countries spanning the globe. Their reasons for studying abroad are many. Of course, the desire for adventure, cultural exposure, language immersion, and an expanded global awareness are still fundamental reasons to study abroad. Nevertheless, new reasons to study abroad continue to surface as events in the world necessitate the reciprocal exchange of culture and education.

In order to prepare for coming generations of study abroad participants, further research needs to be done regarding availability of study abroad programs to diverse student populations. Currently, it appears that study abroad is the domain of traditional age, Caucasian college students (“Demographics,” n.d.). Studying abroad is just as
valuable to non-traditional, minority learners; yet disproportionate numbers of these students participate. Research should be done with regard to overall perceptions of study abroad programs, the availability of financial support, how institutions advertise their programs to diverse student populations, and the types of opportunities available to scholars at foreign universities.

Study abroad as an academic program is still in its infancy. What will become of study abroad programming in the next eighty years? Who will participate in the programs of the future and for what reasons? As new English language degree programs continue to spawn in countries outside of Europe, where will study abroad participants become most concentrated? Will we ever become a global learning community that transcends the concept of study abroad where all universities in the world are part of the same interconnected system? Only time – and the students who have lived the study abroad experience – will tell.
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