

# STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

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## ABSTRACT

This five university study examined 328 students' perceptions of international education and study abroad programs. The research addressed four issues: course work; study abroad; costs; and program characteristics. Many of the students were misinformed regarding their university's programs. The research offers insight for developing and modifying study abroad programs.

## INTRODUCTION

Americans have resisted the need to internationalize. Complacency and arrogance often led American business people to discount cross-cultural and cross-national differences. Without a demand for internationally trained graduates, business schools directed their limited resources elsewhere. Unfortunately, the reality of foreign competition led to a rapid demand for internationally trained executives. The expanding power of trade blocs have made effective international skills essential to sustain the U.S.'s competitive economic advantage. In this decade, U.S. companies have operated in a global economy. Close to one-third of corporations in the U.S. conduct business abroad and more than 80 percent of U.S. goods and services compete against foreign companies (Skousen and Bertelson 1994). Thus, U.S. corporations fighting to be competitive in a global marketplace began to demand a greater emphasis on training business students in international business issues.

Colleges of Business were ill-prepared to fill the demand for international education. The internationalization of the curriculum was far behind Business Schools in other countries (Kwok, Folks, and Arpan 1994). There was a lack of internationally-trained faculty (Rugman 1992/1993). Furthermore, university reward and review systems did not support faculty members who were willing to commit the time to internationalize (Miller 1992/1993).

Recently, universities have been responding to the needs in the marketplace with directed efforts to improve. Internationalization is now a priority among business schools. The AACSB requires that business schools emphasize a global perspective. Unfortunately, not all approaches to internationalization are equally effective.

Universities are internationalizing their curriculum in a variety of ways. Overseas internships, exchange programs, and joint ventures all offer ways to achieve a global education. One type of program often included in internationalization efforts is a study abroad program.

Despite these efforts to internationalize the curriculum, internationalization of the student body has not always met with success. The success of a university's efforts has been linked to the university's students. Cavusgil (1991) indicated that it was important to internationalize the student body. Neubaum, Burden, and Byran (1997) reported that the students' lack of interest for international education opportunities can significantly deter effective internationalization. Therefore, for a university to effectively internationalize, the students must embrace the programs.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all the constituencies of international study, e.g., students, parents, faculty, administrators, recruiters. Fortunately, several existing studies focus on some critical areas such as: (1) curriculum design (Green and Gerber 1996; Cavusgil 1991); (2) faculty requirements (Kwok and Arpan 1994; Rugman 1992/1993); and employers' needs (Albers-Miller 1998). What is lacking, however, is a consideration of the students' expectations.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHOD

The objective of this research was to identify the beliefs of students regarding international study. Specifically, the research focused on four major issues: students' feelings about international course work in general; students' current perceptions of study abroad programs; students' perceptions of costs in both time and money; and program characteristics desired by students.

A questionnaire containing Likert-type responses was used to collect the data. Responses were indicated on a 1 to 5 scale of strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree. General demographic data were collected following the statements.

The survey was administered on five university campuses to students in Business Administration classes. The universities were located in three southern states. Three of the universities were public schools and two

were private. Two of the universities were considered large (more than 20,000 students), while three were considered to be small to medium (20,000 students or less).

The respondents were all students taking marketing classes. Of the 328 surveys returned, public school students returned 181 (55.2%). Most of the responses were collected on small to medium campuses (210 surveys, 64.0%). In addition to variation in the type of university, the sample varied with regard to student characteristics. Almost half of the students (162 respondents or 49.4%) indicated that their parents paid for all or most of their education. One hundred and six of the students paid all or most of the expenses (32.3%). The remaining students indicated a combination or other source of funding, such as their employer. A majority of the sample was single (284 respondents or 86.6%). Approximately three quarters of the students (249 respondents or 75.9%) were attending day classes. The surveys were largely collected from undergraduate students (308 students or 93.9%).

## RESULTS

### Student's Lack of Desire to Gain International Exposure

As some scholars have suggested, not all students favor internationalization of the curriculum. Many of the students in this study did not take advantage of current international opportunities. Only half of the respondents (50.6%) expressed an interest in international course work. Just over half of the students (52.7%) indicated that given a choice they would prefer an international-

oriented course over a traditional course. Only 38.4 percent indicated that they would take an international course if it was not required. Comparisons of group means using t tests indicated that students paying for their own education were more likely to favor international courses. The actual statements, the percent agreeing with the statement and the t test results comparing means between groups of students are provided in Table 1.

Because lack of student participation is a hindrance to internationalization efforts, designing programs that meet the students' needs and expectations is important. Understanding the students' current perceptions of the programs is insightful. Soliciting their concerns and expectations can be useful in developing and refining study abroad programs.

### Students' Perceptions of Study Abroad Programs

Students' perceptions of study abroad programs were very favorable. A large majority of the respondents considered studying abroad to be fun (83.8%), beneficial (83.8%), and a good experience (83.2%). T tests indicated that generally students attending smaller and/or private schools, single, day and/or graduate students were more likely to agree. While students in general felt like studying abroad was positive, they were less likely to consider it as practical (65.6%). Day, single and/or unemployed students attending small to medium sized schools and/or private schools were more likely to consider studying abroad as practical. Overall, the students felt like employers would view participation favorably. Most of the students (79.3%) thought that employers would think the program was useful and 68.6 percent thought that participation in such a program would help

TABLE 1  
Student's Lack of Desire to Gain International Exposure

Statement	Percent Agree	Most Likely to Agree based on T test Comparisons of Means						
		Public?	Size	Funding	Class	Day?	Single?	Emp?
I am interested in course work with an international focus.	50.6	ns	ns	Stud*	ns	ns	ns	ns
In my degree plan, if I am given a choice between two courses, one with an international focus and one that is not, I would take the international course.	52.7	ns	L*	Stud**	ns	N*	ns	ns
I would take international courses even if they were not required.	38.4	ns	ns	Stud**	ns	ns	ns	ns

\* Significant at the 0.01 level \*\* Significant at the 0.05 level

them get a job after graduation. The actual statements, the percent agreeing with the statement and the t test results are provided in Table 2.

Although students responded favorably to the programs in general and most knew someone who had studied abroad (73.5%), few had taken any steps toward actually participating in a program. Only 16.2 percent of the population had already studied abroad. These students were most likely to attend a night class, at a large university and/or be unemployed.

Surprisingly, although 55.2 percent had seen information about their university's study abroad opportuni-

ties, only 22.3 percent felt they knew a great deal about study abroad programs. More disturbing from a marketing perspective, 18 percent incorrectly assumed that their university did not have an available study abroad program. Single, unemployed students attending private and/or small to medium schools were more likely to feel knowledgeable. Furthermore, few respondents had talked to an advisor about participating (22.0%). The actual statements, the percent agreeing with the statement and the t test results are provided in Table 2.

In addition to having misconceptions about the existence of a program, several of the respondents were misinformed about the types of programs. Almost half of

**TABLE 2**  
**Student Perceptions of Study Abroad Programs**

Statement	Percent Agree	Most Likely to Agree based on T test Comparisons of Means						
		Public?	Size	Funding	Class	Day?	Single?	Emp?
Studying abroad is beneficial.	83.8	Priv*	Sm*	Par/O**	ns	D*	S*	ns
Studying abroad would be fun.	83.8	Priv*	Sm*	ns	Grad*	ns	S*	ns
Studying abroad would be a good experience.	83.2	Priv*	Sm*	ns	Grad*	ns	S*	ns
Studying abroad is practical.	65.6	Priv*	Sm*	ns	ns	D**	ns	Un*
Employers think that studying abroad is useful.	79.3	ns	ns	Par**	ns	ns	S*	ns
Studying abroad would help me get a job when I graduate.	68.6	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	Em**
I know someone who has studied abroad.	73.5	Priv*	Sm*	ns	Grad**	ns	ns	Un**
I have already participated in a study abroad program.	16.2	ns	L**	ns	ns	N**	ns	Un**
I know a lot about study abroad programs.	22.3	Priv*	Sm*	ns	ns	ns	S*	Un**
My university offers study abroad programs.	82.0	Priv*	ns	Par/O*	Grad*	ns	ns	ns
I have seen information about my university's study abroad opportunities.	55.2	Priv*	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	Un*
I have talked to an advisor about my university's study abroad opportunities.	22.0	Priv**	Sm*	ns	ns	ns	S**	Un**

\* Significant at the 0.01 level \*\*Significant at the 0.05 level

the students (45.1%), across all groups, thought that they would be required to know a foreign language in order to participate in a study abroad program offered in a country where English was not a commonly spoken language. Of course, in many cases this is not true because the classes are offered in English. Despite the fact that all of the universities included in the survey offered programs designed for business students, 36.3 percent of the respondents were unaware that the programs were offered. Some of the students (15.6%) thought study abroad programs were only available for Humanities and Arts majors. Additionally, some of the students (16.2%) thought that the courses offered in study abroad programs would not apply to their degree. Undergraduate students at large, public universities are the most likely to be ill-informed. The actual statements pertaining to student misconceptions about their university's study abroad programs, the percent agreeing with these statements and the t test results are provided in Table 3.

### Student Concerns about Time and Money

While misconceptions about the available programs may serve as a deterrent to participation, students also expressed some concerns about time and money. While few of the students (9.2%) felt that a study abroad program was a waste of time, and only slightly more (16.2%) thought that the program would take too much time (16.2%), almost half (44.5%) of the respondents felt that they did not have enough time to participate. Exactly

half of the respondents (50%) indicated that participation would delay their graduation.

More than half of the students expressed concerns about the cost of studying abroad. Many students (57.0%) indicated that they could not afford to study abroad. The programs were perceived as too costly by 54.3 percent. While cost of the programs was a concern and all of the universities included in the study had some scholarship program available to defray the cost, less than half of the respondents knew that scholarships were available (46.3%). Further, students' perceptions about study abroad scholarships were not positive. Although some of the universities in this study grant study abroad scholarships to virtually any applicant in good standing, many (45.1%) thought that it would be difficult to qualify for such scholarships and only a few (26.2%) felt like they might get a scholarship if they applied for it. The actual statements regarding student concerns about time and money, the percent agreeing with these statements and the t test results are provided in Table 4.

### Student Desired Program Characteristics

Designing a program that appeals to students is easier with their input. Students were not concerned about who taught the courses in study abroad programs. Only 21.7 percent felt that the programs should only be taught by foreign faculty. Likewise, only 23.8 percent felt that the programs should only be taught by their

**TABLE 3**  
Student Misconceptions about their University's Study Abroad Programs

Statement	Percent Agree	Most Likely to Agree based on T test Comparisons of Means						
		Public?	Size	Funding	Class	Day?	Single?	Emp?
I have to speak a foreign language to study abroad in a country where English is not commonly spoken.	45.1	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
My university offers study abroad opportunities specifically for business students.	63.7	Priv*	Sm*	Par**	ns	ns	ns	ns
Study abroad programs are mainly for Humanities and Art majors.	15.6	Pub*	L*	Par*	ns	ns	ns	ns
There are no study abroad programs at my university that would offer courses applying toward my degree.	16.2	Pub*	L**	ns	Under*	ns	ns	ns

\* Significant at the 0.01 level \*\* Significant at the 0.05 level

**TABLE 4**  
**Student's Concerns about Time and Money**

Statement	Percent Agree	Most Likely to Agree based on T test Comparisons of Means						
		Public?	Size	Funding	Class	Day?	Single?	Emp?
Studying abroad takes too much time.	16.2	Pub*	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
Studying abroad is a waste of time.	9.2	Pub*	L**	ns	Under*	ns	ns	ns
I do not have time to study abroad	44.5	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	M*	ns
Studying abroad would delay my graduation date.	50.0	Pub**	ns	ns	ns	D*	ns	ns
I cannot afford to study abroad.	57.0	ns	ns	Stud**	ns	ns	ns	Em**
Studying abroad costs too much money.	54.3	ns	ns	Stud**	ns	ns	S**	ns
There are scholarships available to help defray the costs of studying abroad.	46.3	Priv**	ns	ns	Under*	ns	ns	ns
It would be hard to qualify for a study abroad scholarship.	45.1	ns	ns	ns	ns	N**	ns	ns
I think I would get a scholarship to study abroad if I applied for one.	26.2	ns	L*	ns	ns	N**	ns	ns

\* Significant at the 0.01 level    \*\* Significant at the 0.05 level

university's faculty. Most respondents (68.6%) indicated that transfer credit was acceptable. The programs were more appealing when courses needed for graduation were offered. Many (42.4%) indicated that they would only be interested if the programs offered such courses. Students were willing to consider various lengths of programs. Longer programs were generally favored, but a year seemed too long for most students. Short programs were favored by private school and married students. Longer programs were more acceptable to students attending large or public schools. The actual statements regarding program characteristics, the percent agreeing with these statements and t test results are provided in Table 5.

#### DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The goals of promoting a broad perspective and an expanded appreciation for cultural diversity will only be fulfilled by giving students the opportunity to study

internationally. With more and more institutions offering internationally-oriented business degree plans, competitive Colleges of Business must understand the needs of the students to whom they are marketing and, based on student input, make modifications to existing programs. How should universities develop their international offerings to satisfy students' needs and expectations?

To best help students prepare for this global marketplace, they must first increase their participation in various forms of international study. As other scholars have indicated and this study confirmed, a lack of interest on the part of the student is a serious hindrance. Study abroad programs offer an approach to learning, other than classroom instruction, that is viewed favorably by students. Students perceive that the programs provide a positive educational experience, while being fun and practical. Students returning from participation in the programs generally speak highly of the experience. One student, returning from a six-week, multicountry study abroad program commented that "I learned so much in

**TABLE 5**  
**Program Characteristics**

Statement	Percent	Most Likely to Agree based on T test Comparisons of Means						
		Public?	Size	Funding	Class	Day?	Single?	Emp?
I would only be interested in studying abroad if the courses were taught by foreign faculty.	21.7	Pub*	L*	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
I would only be interested in studying abroad if the courses were taught by my university's faculty.	23.8	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	S*	ns
I would consider a study abroad program that offered transfer credit to my university.	68.6	Priv*	Sm**	Par**	ns	ns	M*	ns
A study abroad program would only appeal to me if courses required for graduation were offered.	42.4	Priv**	ns	ns	ns	ns	S*	ns
I would consider participating in a study abroad program than lasted one week.	50.6	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
I would consider participating in a study abroad program than lasted two weeks.	56.4	Priv**	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
I would consider participating in a study abroad program than lasted one month.	66.2	Priv**	ns	ns	ns	ns	S*	ns
I would consider participating in a study abroad program than lasted one semester.	54.9	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	S*	ns
I would consider participating in a study abroad program than lasted one year.	35.6	Pub*	L*	ns	ns	ns	S*	ns

\* Significant at the 0.01 level    \*\* Significant at the 0.05 level

my classes and on the field trips that I feel those six weeks studying abroad were more valuable than any one year on campus." Another commented, "This is an excellent way to learn about both international business and foreign cultures, while having a wonderful time." When considering stimulating student interest, it seems that study abroad programs offer an attractive alternative to other internationalization methods.

Unfortunately, many students appear to be misinformed and under informed about currently available study abroad programs. Although a majority of the students in this study had been exposed to study abroad program materials, they still did not feel like they knew much about the available programs. This study actually confirmed the students' feelings by exposing the degree to which students are misinformed and are basing deci-

sions on inaccurate assumptions. Colleges of Business that wish to use this valuable tool to expose students to the international business environment must improve the dissemination of knowledge to the student.

Although many of the students in this study expressed concerns about the costs and the time required to participate in a study abroad program, many of the students were not discouraged by the associated costs. Two observations can be made based on this finding. First, many students who believe they have both the time and money to participate in study abroad programs do not participate, despite the fact that they view the programs favorably. Programs need to be designed that appeal to these students and accommodate their needs. Second, students with concerns about financial and time commitments need to be better educated with regard to the types of programs available and the financial assistance available to defray the costs. Most of the students were ill-informed about the study abroad scholarship assistance available at their university.

Finally, programs should be designed or modified to address student needs and desires. Students wanted to take classes that would apply toward graduation. Transfer credit was generally acceptable. Students favored programs that offered courses that fulfilled degree-plan requirements. Depending on the individual characteristics of the university's student body, preferred program length varied. Generally, single students were interested in programs that lasted several weeks to a couple of months, while married students preferred programs less than a month. Students at private schools tended to prefer programs lasting a few weeks that could be conducted over the summer. Students at large, public universities were more willing than private school students to consider a semester abroad. This suggests that universities have an opportunity to customize their study abroad program to meet the specific needs and expectations of their student body. In order to do this, however, it is imperative that they have a detailed understanding of their students' needs and desires.

Some of the results of this study should be viewed with caution. The study is limited by the sample characteristics. The study consisted almost exclusively of undergraduate students. The graduate students included in

this study expressed interest and were favorably disposed toward study abroad programs. The needs and expectations of graduate students should be addressed with additional research. Very few of the students in this sample were married. Because married students appeared to have some unique considerations and expectations, future studies should examine this portion of the population more closely. Furthermore, night students were under represented in the sample. While there appear to be relatively few differences between the day and night student population, future studies might look at this portion of the population more closely. Finally, all five universities included in this study were located in southern states. While there is no reason to believe, a priori, that the needs and expectations of students at northern universities would be different, future studies should include their students.

This research sought to identify students' perceptions and concerns regarding international education in general and study abroad programs specifically. It is thought that this information can help Colleges of Business to better target and promote international studies. Based upon the problem areas indicated by the current research, it is recommended that:

- universities developed customized study abroad programs specifically designed to meet the needs of their student population;
- universities engage in a systematic communication program designed to inform students about the attributes and related benefits of their study abroad programs;
- universities take steps to inform students about financial aid availability and specifically the requirements necessary to qualify for this aid; and
- once universities have designed and effectively communicated program information, universities must actively promote the programs to overcome student apathy and encourage student participation.

Better designed and managed programs will produce better prepared graduates.

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