

# **An Educators Guide to Increase the Effectiveness of University Study Abroad Programs**

**Dr. Mary G. Vermillion, PhD**

Driehaus School of Business, DePaul University  
1 East Jackson Boulevard, Chicago, IL 60604

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## **ABSTRACT**

According to the 2017 Open Doors Report 325,339 American college students participated in study abroad programs. This number trails other countries who account for approximately 4.15 million participants worldwide. These numbers are reflective of the increasing importance of globalization. Most Universities encourage and many Universities are requiring all students to participate in either a short term or long-term study abroad program. Study abroad programs are designed to take students out of their comfort zones and introduce them to different cultures and global awareness. This paper provides a variety of ideas that will enhance the effectiveness of organizing and implementing study abroad programs. Tips for understanding why students study abroad, study abroad models, pre-planning, choosing students and follow are outlined to assist in planning study abroad programs for university students.

## **1. Why study abroad**

Universities recognize that there are several benefits derived from study abroad programs. Research shows that, increased cultural sensitivity (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen&Hubard, 2006) build student confidence, heightened awareness and appreciation for other cultures (Pence &Magillvray, 2008), are only a few reason universities encourage students to study abroad (Sachau, D., Brasher, N. & Fee, S., 2010). Universities recognize the need to prepare students to operate and compete in the increasingly complex globalized marketplace. Study abroad programs are one way for all students to experience and learn about new cultures in a safe environment. “Introducing students to unfamiliar international cultures, where different

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economic philosophies and social practices are in force (e.g., capitalism, socialism, communism, and democracy) can produce a variety of responses ranging from surprise, wonder, skepticism, or disdain. Having students recognize these differences is very important, particularly if they wish to learn how to navigate in global markets that do not engage in familiar practices or methods of business (Long, M.M., Sandler, D.M., & Topol, M.T., 2017).” Understanding and respecting cultural practices when conducting business in the diverse global marketplace is a skill that must be learned and immersing students in a different culture, through well planned study abroad programs, can be the competitive edge when applying for jobs.

## **2. Learning Theories in Study Abroad Programs**

“Research provides compelling support for the importance and efficacy of study abroad programs. Strange and Gibson (2017) indicated the theoretical basis for study abroad experiences lies within two major learning theories: Transformative Learning Theory and Experiential Learning Theory. Transformative Learning Theory was first developed by Jack Mezirow in the 1990s. This theory postulates that adult learners are challenged best to change their life perspectives and overcome biases ‘through reflection, active learning, and placing ourselves in uncomfortable situations’ (Strange & Gibson, 2017, p. 86). Obviously, study abroad experiences take students out of their comfort zones and expose them to situations and cultural engagements, which are beyond their typical life experiences. The second theory Strange and Gibson (2017) referred to was Experiential Learning Experience. Experiential Learning Experience theory is based on the student learning through an engaged experience and then reflecting upon that experience to glean what has been learned (Bain & Yaklin, 2019).” Study abroad planners should build in transformational and experiential learning to University study abroad programs.

## **3. Study Abroad Objectives**

In 2010, Sachau, Brasher and Fee stressed the importance of developing categorical educational goals including increasing knowledge, shaping attitudes and building confidence (Sachau, Brasher & Fee, 2010) for each study abroad trip. Each of these goals should be utilized through out the planning and implementation stages of study abroad programs. One way to make sure the program is meeting goals is to turn them into S.M.A.R.T. (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and timely) objectives. That way at the end of the program planners will know based on relevant measurable objectives if the trip was a success.

## **4. Planning**

The planning phase is the longest and often most difficult phase of the study abroad program. There are so many different rules and regulations set by each University that it is impossible to cover every scenario. This section of the paper will cover the process Pre-Departure Planning, First Day Walking Tour, Balance Academic with Cultural, Company Tours Student Exchange (Koernig, 2007) and Follow-Up.

#### 4.1 Pre-departure planning

The study abroad program should start with a variety of required meetings that will tell students the S.M.A.R.T. objectives of the trip and give students an introduction of what to expect on the trip. During the first meeting use ice breakers and games to learn names and create interaction among students. When creating teams for pre-planning activities make sure to mix it up so that students work with as many people as possible before the trip. In future meetings the academic content and expectations should be set. Rules should be discussed early and often so that there are no questions of what is required.

- *Icebreakers* are a good way to have fun getting to know each other. Since students often visit countries where they do not speak the language a silent charades game is a good idea. Students pair up with one other person they do not know introduce themselves by stating only their name then using no words they must tell the other person three things about themselves. After 5 minutes each person will introduce their partner to the group.
- *Academic Content* In future meeting students should make presentations about countries and companies being visited. This helps students recognize that this is an academic program not a vacation. After company presentations is a great time to have students compile a list of 3-5 questions for each company. This way at the end of a company tour or presentation during the question and answer section students will be prepared to ask intelligent questions. Instruct students that this is not the time to ask, “are you hiring”?
- *Scavenger Hunt* After several meetings one way to create trust and foster relationships is sending students out on a scavenger hunt. Give each team a set amount of money, a time limit and a category (utensils, drinks, meat, vegetable, dessert...) and send them out to purchase different parts of a meal. The groups are not to converse before heading out. The idea is to force students to make decisions and to make do with whatever the group provides. This gives the leader an opportunity to see potential problems and deal with them before the it is too late.
- *Rules and Expectations* Create a written document that outlines all rules and regulations regarding behavior on the trip. This document should be distributed and signed by every student. It should cover expectations regarding lateness, missing meetings or trip activities, proper attire for company visits and following directions of those leading each part of the trip. Parents are often reassured by these rules and regulations. Keep in mind these students are young adults so do not try to control every aspect of their behavior. Study abroad programs are designed to give students a chance to explore and grow with the leader acting as a safety net when needed. In addition to required exams, papers and presentations students should be encouraged to keep a daily log or diary.
- *Cultural Awareness* Assign teams of students to come up with a list of cultural tips and information that can be presented during a group meeting. If possible, invite students or business people from the countries you are visiting to present and answer questions.

- *Group Historians* Have several students volunteer to act as the group historians. Their job will be to videotape, photograph and take notes about the events of the trip. Encourage the historians to show the good, bad and to focus on the changes as students grow and become more confident navigating different countries. The historians can also ask the classmates to share favorite or most embarrassing moments.
- *Student Leaders* Before the trip assign students' different responsibilities on the trip. Mapping out a route to company visits, making sure all luggage and students are on board, leading group activities, introducing speakers and a variety of other jobs that need to be done are all ways to give students a feeling of ownership and helps build their confidence. Make sure the responsibilities are clear before departure and be available to assist as needed. If a student decides that a group trip to beer garden is a great idea let them plan and lead the group. The more opportunities the leader can find for student led activities the more growth and confidence students will experience.

#### **4.2 First Day Walking Tour**

After travelling students are often hungry, tired and excited to get started all at once. Get everyone checked in to hotels or dormitories and then plan to meet after a couple of hours. Plan to spend the first day getting students acquainted with the area, public transportation and money exchanges or money machines. Arrange to have snacks or a quick meal before heading out on a guided tour. A picnic at one of the countries landmarks is a great way to start a tour. Encourage students to adjust their internal time clock by eating and sleeping on times set by the new time zone.

#### **4.3 Balance Academic with Cultural**

When planning the day to day itinerary keep in mind that there must be a balance between academic content and cultural content. The academic part is usually the easiest because planners have written objectives that help guide planned activities. It is easy to go overboard scheduling academic activities to justify the expense of the trip to the study abroad office. Avoid this trap by scheduling free time where students can take tours to explore the country on their own. It is a good idea to provide resources that outline different tours and adventures available in each country but give students freedom to choose their own path.

#### **4.4 Company Tours**

Choose company tours that will interest students and provide learning opportunities. After each tour there should be formal or informal meetings where students are encouraged to discuss what was learned. When a company invites your group to attend a presentation it is important to make sure students show respect and appreciation. One way of showing respect is asking relevant questions. During your pre-trip meeting it is a good idea to assign specific questions to students so there will not be blank stares or silence when a presenter asks for questions. This is also an opportunity to ensure that every student asks at least one question during the trip.

#### 4.5 Student Exchange

If possible, create an activity where students from host countries provide a tour of their University or attend a group meet and greet. Students enjoy meeting each other and providing a T-shirt exchange is a fun way to encourage interaction.

#### 4.6 Follow-up

The study abroad trip should not end with the trip. Students should be required to make presentation to their classmates who were not part of the study abroad program at new student orientations or in class room settings. This gives students who were part of the study abroad trip to share their experiences while reintegrating with their home country. Videotape and photograph clips of presentations and favorite moments by students while they are on the trip and have a final meeting where the video can be viewed, and students can be reminded of the fun and struggles they encountered during the trip. Clips of this video can be used when recruiting students for the next study abroad program. When possible invite previous students to go on a return trip to act as an assistant leader. Having a leader closer to a students age can be very reassuring for students. It also gives the leader an extra set of eyes to help maintain the safety and well being of new student participants.

### 5. Choosing Students

There are several factors that should be considered when choosing students to be part of a trip. In 2017, Niendorf& Alberts, examined a list with four broad qualities that should be considered when choosing students for study abroad trips; “emotional resilience, flexibility/openness, perceptual acuity, personal autonomy (Kelly & Myers,1995).” (Niendorf& Alberts, 2017)When choosing students, it is important for planners to try to uncover as much as possible regarding these four broad categories.

- *Emotional Resilience* refers to strength and willingness to try new things or take a risk. Travelling abroad can be scary, frustrating, and confusing for students who do not have a positive attitude. Students who tend to see the glass as half full often become so frustrated that they can cause infect other students with a negative attitude and inhibit student growth (Kelly & Meyer, 1975). One of the most disappointing things to hear from American students on study abroad trips is, “where is McDonald’s”. Find students who want to try local cuisine and are not embarrassed to attempt simple phrases in the native language.
- *Flexibility/openness* allows students to adapt different ways of thinking and conducting business. Friendly students who are more interested in learning about the local traditions and can respectfully interact with people from diverse backgrounds are good candidates for study abroad(Kelley & Meyers, 1995).A willingness to observe and go with the flow honoring the way each country operates without complaint is important. Students who are willing to stand in line, or crowd in at the counter if that is how the country works, are good candidates.
- *Perceptual acuity* is all about how aware the student is about verbal and nonverbal cues. In countries that speak a foreign language the ability to read nonverbal cues helps students tread lightly or move forward with new activities without offending

your host country (Kelley & Meyers, 1995). If the country, you are visiting does not approve of loud talking and laughing while dining students must be able to recognize the nonverbal cues other diners are giving them and behave accordingly.

- *Personal autonomy* is crucial on study abroad programs. It is impossible for the study leader to be with every student 24 hours a day. Students must be willing and able to make decisions, take responsibility for their own actions, be respectful of others time and beliefs (Kelley & Meyers, 1995). If a student is known for being disrespectful or arrogant in their own country that behavior will only magnify on a study abroad program.

In addition to conducting one on one interviews with potential study abroad students it is important to ask for references from teachers and other friends. Always ask the references to give you strengths and weaknesses of the candidate. References often give information that they believe is positive that may in fact highlight a potential problem. Conduct interviews with students after they submit all paperwork so that potential conflicts or problems can be discussed.

## **6. On Ground Problems**

Study abroad leaders are charged with providing guidelines to ensure the safety and well being of students.

- *Lost luggage, passport or credit cards* Be prepared for panic-stricken students who lose a variety of essential items. Before the trip students should make copies of all passports and credit cards. The copies should be left with parents or a reliable friend who can be counted on to provide the information as needed. Lost luggage can take days to catch up so instruct students to pack one nice outfit that can be worn to company visits in carry-on bag. Any essentials, like medications, should be in a carry-on bag.
- *Late* Students are notorious for showing up late. Always tell students they must arrive at least 15 minutes before departure. Set a departure time and do not wait for stragglers. Leaving several students behind on the first activity sets the tone and students quickly realize they will be left behind and held accountable for missing deadlines. Inform students before the trip of the grade penalty for students who miss company visits. Make sure that parents are made aware of the late policy in case students are left behind and miss a train or ferry to the next destination. Students should be given clear instructions of what to do if they are left behind. Make sure there is a clear policy on points lost for being left behind in a country as opposed to missing a company visit. Some students may purposely stay behind if there is not a serious penalty.
- *Tracking* It is difficult to keep track of a group of students while boarding buses, trains, and other public transportation. One way to do a quick count is assign each student a number. Then every time you get on or off public transport simply do a quick count. Train students will call out their numbers in loud clear voices, “1, 2, 3...”. If a number is missing a quick look at your roster identifies the missing student. Encourage students to watch out for and help each other stay on track. Make sure all



students have An itinerary with addresses and meeting times so they can take a cab and catch up with the group. After the first few days students settle in to the chaotic travel and become easier to track.

- *Drinking too much* University students are young adults and are legally allowed to drink in most countries. That said, it is a good idea to remind them of a few safety rules. Do not go out on your own drinking because you could end up in a dangerous situation with no help. Showing up at company visits reeking of alcohol and hung over makes a horrible impression. When coming and going from your hotel be respectful and keep noise to a minimum. No parties in your hotel rooms. Hotels can and will ban an entire group from a hotel if your group is too disruptive. If there are any complaints the group leader should immediately go and talk to the students involved. The next day students involved should apologize to the manager in charge.
- *Plan implodes* The key is to plan for as much as possible and embrace the unexpected. Even the best laid plans will go awry. Weather delays, cancelled flights, company visit cancelled or any number of things could cause the plan to falter. When that happens stay calm, keep smiling, do not start trying to assign blame, regroup come up with the best new plan possible and show students that there is always a way forward. The benefits of study abroad far outweigh the hassles and frustrations of a plan gone wrong.

## 7. Summary

Study abroad programs are an outstanding way to give students the opportunity to learn and grow. Create a strong written plan with learning objectives, Train students and make all expectations clear before departure. Follow the plan, embrace the unexpected and give students the opportunity to make wise decisions while on a great learning adventure.

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