

## **Short-Term Study Abroad: An Exploratory View of Business Student Outcomes**

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*Acknowledging the importance of fostering global perspectives in students, business educators stress the role that international study plays in increasing interpersonal skills, and broadening knowledge of global business practices. Traditionally offered as semester- or year-long programs, today's programs are more often short-term in nature, raising questions about student outcomes of abbreviated tours. This longitudinal study of students who participated over a nine-year period examines the benefits and limitations of short-term tours. Results suggest that schools of business give careful consideration to desired student outcomes, learning objectives and how these might best be accomplished if delivered in a compressed time frame.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, institutions of higher education have increasingly come to encourage student involvement in study abroad. Proponents stress a number of positive outcomes for student participants including academic achievement, personal development, greater cultural appreciation, and enhanced global awareness (e.g., Carlson, Bum, Useem, & Yachimowicz, 1991; Drews & Myer, 1996; Hadis, 2005). Students, whatever their major, seem to also recognize the benefits of international study, as evidenced by record numbers of study abroad participants in 2007 and a roughly 150% increase in rates of participation since 1995, according to the Institute of International Education (IIE) in its *Open Doors* Report (2009).

In acknowledgement of the importance of fostering a global perspective in their students, many business educators stress the role that international study can play in increasing interpersonal skills and also broadening knowledge of global business practices (Marlowe et al., 1998; Henthorne et al., 2001; Sideli, Dollinger & Doyle, 2003). Although hard data is lacking to support the supposition (Orahoad, Kruze, and Pearson, 2006), the study abroad experience is also promoted as preparation for an international business career or a helpful qualification for potential job candidates (Doorbar, 2003). Perhaps as an outcome, business majors now comprise 20% of Americans who study abroad each year, according to the Institute of International Education (IIE) in their 2009 annual report. IIE also reports that

participation of business students in study abroad has more than doubled since 1998. These levels of participation are a hopeful sign that the next generation of managers will be prepared for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century global environment of business.

One explanation for rising participation in study abroad on the part of business majors is the emergence of short-term study tours. Traditionally offered as semester- or year- long programs, today's study abroad programs are more often short-term in nature, offering students the advantages of lower costs and shorter time commitments. In the 2007/2008 academic year, summer-only tours and those less than eight weeks long comprised 56% of all programs offered by U.S. colleges and universities (IIE). IIE does not break down their report data based on tour duration combined with field of study, but in the authors' home state of Georgia, short-duration programs comprise approximately 75% of all University System business study tours, and the majority of these last three weeks or less (Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia 2010). In light of this data, one can conclude that the average business student who studies abroad participates in a short-term program.

While the growing number of business students participating in study abroad is indeed encouraging, questions have been raised about the global quality and impact of short-term programs abroad, including concerns with student learning and development (Inside Higher Education 2010). Business students and their families commit financial as well as time resources to participate, often based on expectations that participation will lead to educational and career outcomes beyond what they could receive in a traditional classroom setting. Business colleges offer academic business credit for short-term study abroad programs under the assumption that these program result in learning outcomes comparable to or even surpassing that delivered in a campus classroom setting. In some instances, students' employers pay study abroad program fees, perhaps expecting that the experience will enhance their business skills and competencies of the student employee. Given these vested interests in study abroad outcomes, assessment of student gains from their international experiences is clearly needed.

Assessment studies addressing study abroad learning outcomes have begun to appear in the literature only in the past several years. These studies have tended to look at study abroad in a collective sense *across* the disciplines, however, so information on outcomes for business students is sorely lacking. Also, because short-term study programs were so recently introduced, little is known at this time about their academic or practical merit (i.e., whether a few weeks of international exposure has sufficient impact). Additionally, more information is needed on the short- vs. long-range impact of study abroad on business student participants.

This study addresses some of the gaps in current knowledge about business students' gain from short-duration study abroad programs. Through a survey of student alumni who participated in a recurring undergraduate business study tour, some more recently and some as long as nine years ago, the study examines students' perceptions of the impact of study abroad on their personal and professional lives. While exploratory in nature, the study findings should be of interest to a variety of parties, including business students and their families, educators who teach in study abroad programs, administrators involved in business curriculum development, and potential employers from the broader business community.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Assessment of Learning Outcomes Across the Disciplines

Many early reports on study abroad outcomes were based on anecdotal accounts from participating faculty and study abroad administrators. As recently as 2001, researchers noted that impact studies were surprisingly few in number, and knowledge in this area has been described as relatively undeveloped (Rubin & Sutton, 2001; Sideli, 2001; Vande Berg 2001). Another shortcoming in the research literature pertains to the *kind* of assessment which has been conducted. Sideli found that 95% of colleges assessed student *satisfaction* following participation, but few measured gains in academic achievement, personal development, or intercultural skills as outcomes of study abroad.

Assessments of long-term benefits of study abroad have emerged quite recently in the research literature. Norris and Gillespie (2008) investigated 17,000 former participants in one of the Institute of International Education of Students' (IIES) study abroad programs conducted between 1950 and 1999. This study examined, among other outcomes, the impact of study abroad on global careers, concluding that a year abroad was more likely to correlate with future international work than summer or even semester programs.

The University System of Georgia's GLOSSARI Project on Study Abroad Learning Outcomes (Higher Education 2010) is a ten-year, survey-based investigation of *academic* outcomes of study abroad across the University System of Georgia. Results of the project found that study abroad participation in longer duration programs was associated with higher graduation rates, better grades following participation, and growth in cultural knowledge.

### **Business-Discipline Learning Outcomes**

Few empirical studies have been undertaken assessing learning outcomes for business study abroad students, and as a consequence, limited evidence is available that supports academic or career gains for business students who participate in study abroad. This is surprising, given the growth in business-focused programs abroad and in the number of student participants. A handful of exceptions can be found, including two studies noting changes in cultural awareness and personal development as a result of participation in business-focused study abroad (Black and Duhon 2005; Carley and Tudor 2006). Another example is a study by Peppas (2005) who examined the perceptions of business students in a recurring graduate-level international study tour. These students reported not only increased cultural sensitivity but also positive outcomes in terms of global business knowledge and increased career opportunities. While these three studies are supportive of gains for business students in study abroad, more evidence is required to make a convincing case for student and institutional investment in study abroad.

### **Short-Duration Study Abroad**

Learning outcomes of *short-term* study abroad programs have barely been addressed. Since so many students, including business majors, elect these shorter programs, this is an undeveloped area ripe for more investigation. Several studies have been published on methods of teaching short-term programs for maximum educational benefit (e.g., DeLoach, Saliba, Smith, & Tiemann, 2003; Guerrero, 2005). Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005a; 2005b) concluded that a short-term biology program in Costa Rica had outcomes for students similar to those of longer programs. Carley and Tudor found that a two-week study tour to Mexico increased business students' intercultural awareness and led to a breakdown in cultural stereotyping. The sole instance which focused on career and educational gains from a short-term program was Peppas' study of graduate business students and their reports of educational and career gains in the months and years following participation. He concluded that well-designed international study programs are a viable alternative to business education for non-traditional business students.

## **DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM**

Two authors of this paper directed and taught in an annually recurring college-sponsored, two-week business study tour each year from 1999 to 2007. Throughout this period, 349 students participated, giving the authors access to a sizable pool of individuals who, for the purpose of this study, met several important criteria. First, the students were exposed to a uniformly structured, business-focused program which varied little year by year (i.e., business visits, similar assignments, pretrip preparation, and cultural excursions). Additionally, the "abroad" portion of the program was the same: two weeks in duration. The study is similar to Peppas' in that it queried students some time after their participation, making it easier to determine longer-range outcomes. Unlike his focus on nontraditional and graduate students, this program was designed for undergraduate students of business who were disproportionately of traditional age.

The study abroad program was sponsored by a state-affiliated university located in a large metropolitan area of the Southeastern U.S. Participants were undergraduate business majors enrolled at the sponsor institution. Although the tour took students to a variety of countries over this time period, the structure of the program was consistent, as was the nature of the core course which was termed “Doing Business in (Name of Country).” Travel occurred in May of each year, sandwiched between spring and summer semesters. Prior to the actual trip, students spent a total of eighteen hours in the classroom in preparation for the study tour. Preparation included readings on the destination country and its business and social culture, written and oral assignments, and a pre-trip examination.

The “abroad” portion of the program consisted of visits to local business and commercial sites, guest presenters from the business community, cultural excursions, observational assignments requiring student interaction with the local environment, and free time for exploration. Travel involved stays at three to four cities during the two-week period. After the trip, one final class was held which included administration of written and oral assignments, post-trip examination, and student reflection of the experience.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research subjects were the 349 students who had participated in one of the May programs directed by the coauthors between 1999 and 2007. Using past class rosters and student contact information provided by the university registrar’s office, a list of participants was developed in the summer of 2007. Since some students had participated as long as nine years prior to the study, it was necessary to update the contact information. This was done through assistance from the Alumni Office and from subsequent information provided by study abroad students themselves regarding fellow students with whom they had maintained contact. The number of tour participants from each year, along with the country they visited in the program, appears in Table 1.

**TABLE 1**  
**CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS BY YEAR, DESTINATION, GENDER, AND CURRENT AGE**

YEAR	COUNTRY	POPULATION STUDENTS	SAMPLE		
			#/(%)	MALE/FEMALE (%)	AGE (Mean)
2007	Brazil	38	16 (42%)	43/57	23
2006	Mexico	40	22 (55%)	19/81	28
2005	Italy	46	22 (48%)	41/59	25
2004	UK/Ireland	46	20 (43%)	30/70	26
2003	UK/Ireland	35	13 (37%)	23/77	29
2002	Spain	40	12 (30%)	33/67	28
2001	Mexico	34	4 (12%)	50/50	31
2000	Mexico	33	3 (9%)	33/67	28
1999	Mexico	37	7 (19%)	43/57	36
TOTAL		349	119 (34%)	33/67	27

### Survey Instrument and Administration

An online questionnaire assessing attitudinal, behavioral, and career outcomes was developed for the purpose of assessing students’ perceptions of learning outcomes from participation in a two-week study

tour. Survey items were developed by two of the coauthors with extensive teaching experience in business study abroad for undergraduate students, one of whom also teaches traditional classes in the area of international business. The instrument also attempted to capture some of the same variables used in Peppas earlier study.

In the summer of 2007, prior to the actual administration, student participants were notified of the purpose of the survey and asked to participate. For students who were part of a 1999-2003 study tour, solicitation was done through regular postal mail since email addresses had not been collected in the early years of the program. For any letter sent via regular mail that was returned, an effort was made to find a current address using such tools as 411.com or conducting an online search using the student's name. Help in locating "outlying" students was also obtained from other program participants who in some cases had maintained contact with these missing individuals.

All 2004-2007 participants were first notified via email. For any emails that came back as "undeliverable," a letter was then sent via regular mail. In mid-August, students who had not responded to the email request were then also sent a letter via regular mail. To encourage participation, all students were offered the incentive of receiving a copy of a final report documenting the study findings.

The online survey was opened in mid-January 2008, and all students for whom contact information was now available (196 individuals) were notified in advance of its opening. Two reminder messages were subsequently sent. Of the 196, 120 respondents completed the questionnaire, representing 34% of the total population of interest. Four respondents had participated in two different years. A breakdown of the sample by year of participation is provided in Table 1. Not surprisingly, representation from the more recent study tours is higher since their contact information was more current and thus easier to obtain.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Demographic Traits of the Sample**

Age and gender breakdowns of the respondents appear in Table 1. Within the sample as a whole, females outnumbered males at a ratio of 2:1; this was characteristic of the student population of the institution during the period of study. The average current age was twenty-seven years.

In addition, eighty-two percent of the respondents were currently employed full-time, 11% worked part-time, and 7% were unemployed. Marketing was the most common major (46% of sample), followed by management (22%), finance (14%), professional sales 8%, and other (10%).

### **Participant Views of Study Abroad Impact**

Respondents were first asked to express their agreement or disagreement on a one-to-five point Likert scale designed to determine perceived influences of study abroad as personally experienced by each former participant. The twenty-two items are presented in descending order based on the average score of each item (Table 2).

The highest scores were given to items pertaining to interest in traveling to other countries (mean = 4.75), recommending study abroad to other students (4.72), and recommending international travel to others (4.69). The respondents also reported increased global awareness (4.54), referring others to the countries where they had traveled (4.52), greater acceptance of other cultures (4.37), and more interest in world affairs (4.36) and traveling to other parts of the U.S. (4.32). Additionally, there was considerable agreement that they had learned more from the study tour than in their regular, campus-based courses (4.13). These outcomes are similar to those of other studies that found attitudinal changes and a generally more open global outlook resulting from short-duration study tours.

Respondents were also queried on outcomes more specific to a business-oriented study abroad program. A common goal of such programs is to raise student understanding of the international business environment, as well as student interest in and preparation for careers in the global workplace. In an earlier study of non-traditional participants in a two-week, graduate business study abroad program, Peppas found a number of positive learning and career outcomes. Support for these outcomes for this group of undergraduate students was relatively weak, however. The mean score for "learned more about

business from the study tour than in a regular business class” was 3.77. On the item pertaining to shaping career choice, the mean score was 3.06; 28% strongly or somewhat agreed that the program had shaped their choices, but the remaining 72% of the respondents disagreed (strongly or somewhat) or were neutral. Other career-related items also received low average scores including seeking work for a multinational company (2.85), attaining employment (2.84), or attaining a job promotion (2.56) as a result of the study tour. Although participants tended to feel they learned more about business than in a regular traditional *business* class (mean = 3.77), this was not viewed as a primary impact of the study abroad experience.

**TABLE 2**  
**STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF BENEFITS OF STUDY ABROAD PARTICIPATION\***

Outcomes	N	Mean	S.D.
1. Increased my interest in traveling to other countries.	119	4.75	.74
2. Have recommended study abroad to other students.	120	4.72	.76
3. Have recommended international travel to others.	120	4.69	.75
4. Increased my global awareness.	119	4.54	.77
5. Have referred others to country where I studied	120	4.52	.88
6. Made me more accepting of other cultures.	120	4.37	.82
7. Increased my interest in world affairs.	120	4.36	.85
8. Increased my interest in traveling to other parts of the United States.	120	4.32	.96
9. Learned more from study tour than in my regular, campus-based classes.	120	4.13	.97
10. Has helped me work better with people from diverse cultures in the United States.	120	4.03	.92
11. Participation increased my interest in learning a foreign language.	120	3.85	1.07
12. Participation increased my interest in living outside of the United States.	119	3.82	1.16
13. Increased my self confidence.	119	3.79	1.04
14. Learned more about business than in a regular business class.	120	3.77	1.04
15. Participation increased my interest in taking courses with an international focus.	120	3.76	1.08
16. Participation has benefited my career.	119	3.75	.99
17. I am better able to work with culturally diverse clients.	119	3.70	.89
18. Have taken trips abroad that I would not have otherwise taken	120	3.38	1.20
19. Participation has shaped my career choice.	119	3.06	.94
20. I sought work for a multinational company as a result of my study tour experience.	119	2.85	1.05
21. Participation helped me attain employment.	119	2.84	1.03
22. Participation helped me attain a job promotion.	119	2.56	.91

\*1-to-5 point scale, 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree

### **Impact of Demographic Traits and Prior Travel Experiences**

Key demographic variables including gender, age, and academic achievement were also examined to determine whether they had any influence on perceptions of what students had learned from study abroad. Age at time of travel was expected to have some impact, particularly on career outcomes, since maturity and more work experience might increase a student’s appreciation for learning, as well as ability to seize career opportunities as they present themselves. As a measure of academic achievement, student grade point average was also considered as a potentially influential variable.

Pearson's correlation coefficients between these demographic traits and learning outcome ratings are presented in Table 3(See Appendix A). Neither age nor gender was related to any of the twenty-two items. Academic performance as measured by GPA was found to correlate with certain learning outcomes, however. Students with higher average grades were more likely to report that the study abroad experience: 1) benefited their career ( $r=.25$ ,  $p<.01$ ); 2) increased their interest in learning a foreign language ( $r=.27$ ,  $p<.01$ ), taking courses with an international focus ( $r=.23$ ,  $p<.05$ ), and traveling within the U.S. ( $r=.27$ ,  $p<.01$ ); and 3) also improved their ability to work with people from diverse cultures ( $r=.21$ ,  $p<.05$ ) and with culturally diverse clients ( $r=.19$ ,  $p<.5$ ).

### **The Impact of Time**

In his study of graduate participants in a two-week study tour course, Peppas found that short-duration tours had long-term perceptual, attitudinal and career outcomes. To assess whether the same would be true for this population of undergraduate students, a lag variable was created to reflect the number of years that had passed since a student first participated in the study abroad program. Correlation coefficients between this variable and each outcome variable appear in Table 3.

Students in more recent programs were significantly more likely to report the following outcomes of their study abroad experience, most of which pertain to global interests and outlook: increased interest in foreign travel ( $r=-.20$ ,  $p<.05$ ), recommending study abroad to others ( $r=-.20$ ,  $p<.05$ ), recommending foreign travel to others ( $r=-.24$ ,  $p<.01$ ), increased global awareness ( $r=-.22$ ,  $p<.01$ ), greater interest in world affairs ( $r=-.22$ ,  $p<.05$ ), and learning more about business than in a regular business class ( $r=-.21$ ,  $p<.05$ ). These correlations aren't altogether unexpected and might be attributable to waning excitement about the international experience with the passing of time.

More surprising is the *overall direction* of the correlations. Across the board, every outcome of study abroad is inversely correlated with the number of years since the respondent participated in study abroad, suggesting that its impact is short-lived. Although the relationships are not statistically significant, more recent participants are more likely to report career benefits than those from earlier years.

## **DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In response to the expanding environment of global business, colleges have encouraged more student participation in study abroad in recent years. The number of business students studying overseas grew more than three fold in the years 1996-2007, putting this group in second place position among academic disciplines in study abroad participation (IIE). This gain is likely attributable to the increasing availability of short-duration study tours, an attractive alternative to traditional semester or yearlong programs.

This study examined how one group of undergraduate business students fared over time after participating in a two-week business study abroad tour, posing the question of whether compressed business study tours are meeting their potential and the actual objectives of business educators. Based on this exploratory investigation, our initial conclusion is not reassuring. Among the study's findings was that cultural gains (i.e., increases in international outlook and interests) were the most significant. This is positive news, and it confirms much of what other investigations have discovered.

Other outcomes are not so encouraging, however. While a major intent of the program was to increase international business appreciation, if not competence, these business gains were minimal. Respondents were inclined to feel they learned more from the experience than in a regular classroom, but they were less inclined to feel this compared with a campus-based *business* class. This particular finding raises pedagogical issues regarding curriculum and business-focused activities that work to best advantage for business students taken abroad to learn about the global business environment.

Some proponents of study abroad have noted its role in preparing students for international business careers or giving them a leg-up in the job market. Peppas' research on graduate students who participated in a two-week business study tour supported these career benefits. Among our undergraduate students, however, study abroad had no such outcomes for their careers or their interest in international work.

Although the time frame was similar for time spent abroad, our student group reported no real career gains.

Finally, the research addressed outcomes in terms of time lapsed since participation, finding that the benefits seemed to diminish over time. The more recently students participated, the more likely they were to report increased interest in foreign travel, more global awareness, and greater interest in international affairs, among other differences. Interestingly, earlier participants who were now older with more work experience under their belts reported no real career benefits.

These findings don't imply that the student and institutional investment in study abroad is without value. Increased global awareness through direct exposure to other cultures is a positive learning outcome, one that appears to occur even with a short-duration study tour. Getting one's feet wet is a first step toward internationalization for the business student. Yet this same outcome can result from any study abroad program, be it in business, the social sciences, or humanities.

This investigation is exploratory only and its findings tentative until more research is conducted on outcomes of business study abroad, particularly for more traditional age undergraduates. If the outcomes of participation in this program are similar to those of other such business study tours, then schools of business may want to think again about desired student outcomes and learning objectives and whether these can be accomplished in a compressed time frame. Consideration should also be given to curriculum design, especially for traditional undergraduates who generally lack maturity and workplace experience. Student engagement in a two-week overseas service learning project or company internship may be a more valuable experience with longer range educational and workplace outcomes.

In addition, business students seeking career benefits or a deeper knowledge of the global business environment may need to be more thoughtful and selective when choosing a business study tour. One size doesn't necessarily fit all. If our findings are reflective of a larger picture, then the business student hoping to maximize the outcomes of study abroad may want to consider a variety of program alternatives.

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APPENDIX A

**TABLE 3**  
**CORRELATIONS OF PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF STUDYABROAD WITH VARIOUS**  
**DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES**

Questions	Gender	Age when Studied Abroad	GPA	Prior Travel	Years since Study Abroad Trip
Increased my interest in traveling to other countries	-.11	-.11	.13	.11	-.20*
Have recommended study abroad to other students	-.14	-.02	-.04	.14	-.20*
Have recommended international travel to others	.07	-.03	.12	-.07	-.24**
Increased my global awareness.	-.08	.01	.09	.08	-.22**
Have referred others to country where I studied.	-.05	-.05	-.08	.05	-.14
Made me more accepting of other cultures.	-.16	.03	.05	.12	-.16
Increased my interest in world affairs.	-.09	-.05	.02	.09	-.22*
Increased my interest in traveling to other parts of US	.01	-.02	.27**	-.01	-.09
Learned more from study tour than in my regular, campus-based classes	.11	-.06	.08	-.11	-.08
Has helped me work better with people from diverse cultures in the US	-.08	.11	.21*	.08	-.16
Participation increased my interest in learning a foreign language	-.04	.05	.27**	.06	-.04
Participation increased my interest in living outside US	-.14	-.07	-.05	.14	-.05
Increased my self confidence	.10	.08	.08	-.10	-.15
Learned more about business than in a regular business class	.14	-.01	.12	-.14	-.21*
Participation increased my interest in taking courses w/international focus	-.04	-.04	.23*	.04	-.07
Participation has benefited my career	-.12	-.12	.25**	.12	-.07
I am better able to work with culturally diverse clients	-.12	-.07	.19*	.12	-.00
Have taken trips abroad that I would not have otherwise taken	-.04	-.03	.03	.04	-.15
Participation has shaped my career choice	.13	-.02	-.02	-.13	-.12
Sought work w/multinational company	-.04	-.03	-.00	.04	-.04
Helped me attain employment	-.04	-.16	.03		-.09
Helped me attain job promotion	.07	-.02	.03		-.02

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01

Gender (male =1, female=0); Prior travel (yes = 1, no = 0)