

## **Study Abroad Decisions: Determinants & Perceived Consequences**

**Hormoz Movassaghi**  
**Ithaca College**

**Fahri Unsal**  
**Ithaca College**

**Kenan Göçer**  
**Beykent University**

*This study examined factors influencing students' decisions to study abroad and the perceived impact of such experiences. Findings identified intellectual and personal growth, career enhancement potential, ability to graduate on time, cost, and financial aid availability as the most important "program-related" considerations, and exposure to other cultures and desire to live independently as key "non-program" factors. Development of deeper intercultural understanding, sensitivity, global mindedness, interpersonal skills, and tolerance were the key learning. Factor analysis confirmed "Cultural Understanding and Personal Growth" and "Cultural Tolerance" as the top decision criteria. Statistically significant differences were observed with respect to study abroad locations.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Study abroad programs (SAP) have become increasingly popular among students in United States and many other countries. The most recent data from the *Institute for International Education* shows a total of 273,996 students from the U.S. studied abroad for credit in 2010-2011 mostly as undergraduates (236,470), an increase of nearly 80% over a decade earlier. Europe was by far the destination of choice (54.6%), followed by Latin America (14.6%) and Asia (11.7%), though 14 out of the top 25 host countries were outside Europe, an increasing trend over time. United Kingdom (12.1%), Italy (11.1%), Spain (9.5%), France (6.2%), and China (5.3%), rounded up the five most popular destinations for American students. At the same time, in 2011-2012, the number of international students in the U.S. had increased to a record high of 764,495, a growth of 32% since 2000-2001, with slightly more undergraduates (309,342) than graduates (300,430); of these, students from China (25.4%), India (13.1%), S. Korea (9.5%), Saudi Arabia (4.5%), and Canada (3.5%) accounted for over half of international students in the U.S. (*Institute for International Education*, 2012).

Since 1980s, colleges and universities in the U.S. have steadily expanded their study abroad opportunities, increased the global contents in many of their programs, instituted foreign language requirements, offered overseas internship options of various durations, developed exchange programs with foreign universities, and recruited international faculty and students, all aimed at increasing

American students' exposure to other cultures as well as in response to heightened demand by corporate world and students alike.

Among business schools, for example, a 2010-2011 survey by AACSB found that 16% of its member schools around the globe had campuses in countries outside their own, with most popular additional locations being in Europe (61% having a second campus), Asia (57%) and Latina America/Caribbean (24%). Similarly, the survey found AACSB member schools had 6655 partnership agreements with other institutions, nearly half with European institutions (3183), followed by Asia and North America - 1484 and 1086 existing partnerships, respectively (AACSB, 2012).

Increased participation of students in SAP, particularly in the last two decades, has generated several studies with largely two overriding foci. One stream of research, and by far the thematically dominant one, has focused on uncovering the perceptions and attitudes that have shaped students' decisions to study abroad (Albers-Miller et al 1999, Jones and Cunningham 2008, Toncaret et al 2008, Goel et al 2010, He and Chen 2010, Presley et al 2010, Garver and Divine 2011), while another strand has concentrated on assessing the impact of study abroad programs on students' intercultural awareness and personal development (Black and Duhon 2006, Clarke et al 2009, Moghaddam et al 2009, Wright and Clarke III 2010, among others).

The target audience of almost all of the prior research has been *business* students and in many cases those who had not studied abroad before were asked on their *perceptions* of why they wanted or did not seek to study abroad. Our study contributes to the extant literature by focusing on students across all majors/schools, not just business students, who had actually gone through the study abroad experience and with the benefits of hindsight and reflection could identify their motives, impressions, and transformational experiences. In addition, while some of the existing studies on SAP have focused either on factors that have motivated or posed as barriers to study abroad while others explored the impact of such programs and experiences on students' personal, academic and professional growth, our research combines both of these foci among students from a Comprehensive college in upstate New York who studied abroad. More specifically, this study's main objectives are to:

1. identify factors that influenced students' study abroad decisions and their locational choices,
2. assess students' satisfaction levels with different aspects of their SAP,
3. examine perceptions of the impact of such experiences on students' long-term intellectual, personal and professional development, and
4. examine location of study abroad sites in the decision process and evaluate the differential impact on students.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Factors Affecting Decisions to Study Abroad

Prior research indicates a multitude of factors that students take into consideration before applying for a SAP, chief among them: program academic qualities and fit with their degree requirements - timely graduation, its location and related health and safety conditions, its implications for their future career goals and prospects, costs/affordability and availability of financial aid, and students' unique personal/attitudinal dispositions.

Garver and Divine (2007) study of 210 business students at a large public Midwestern university in the U.S. found trip location, cost, length of time spent abroad, relevance to student's major, language spoken in class, whether the trip would delay graduation, living accommodations, and career benefits to be the attributes that most significantly influenced students' decisions. Europe and Australia were named to be the most preferred locations while India and Asia the least. As for duration, eight and sixteen weeks were most preferred while two weeks and year-long least preferred. Relyea, Cocchiara and Studdard (2008) similarly found student propensity to participate in a study abroad trip to be a function of perceived career value, relevance to major, and cost.

Jones and Cunningham (2008) focused on sports management students attending a university in Southwest US who indicated gaining experience, travel opportunity, further education, learning outside of

classroom, increased job prospects, and affordability to be the most important factors that would motivate them to participate in a sports management SAP.

Salisbury (2008) found the following relationships in his research on factors influencing students' choice of SAP: family's socioeconomic status and parents' education level were positively related to the student's intent to study abroad; a student receiving financial aid was less likely to study abroad than those not receiving aid; males were less likely to study abroad than females; students demonstrating a higher openness to diverse ideas/people were more likely to study abroad and attendees at liberal arts colleges indicated more interest in studying abroad than students matriculating at non-liberal arts colleges.

A number of studies have investigated the tourism factor in selecting a particular study abroad site. Nyaupane, Paris and Teye (2011) investigated this relationship and concluded that social motivation such as having a good friend or having boy/girlfriend in a foreign country or having a relative in a foreign country were significant variables in the site selection. Gertner (2011) studied similarities and differences in the brand personality perceptions of countries when the students went through the selection process. Another study determined that personal safety, cost/price levels, and hospitality of the potential country were important in their site selection process (Gertner, 2011).

He and Chen (2010) survey of 192 undergraduate students at a Southeastern university in the US found touring opportunities, social contact, and cost to be the most important factors influencing students' choice of an overseas study destination followed by language of study, quality of education, course content, and recommendations from others. They found that students who had not been abroad were more likely to intend to participate. However, they noticed no significant differences among students from different majors related to the factors that motivated students to attend SAP. Finally, a recent study indicated that personal, situational, and location variables influence students' decision to study abroad or not, and location selection (Hackney, Boggs, and Borozan, 2012).

### **Benefits and Challenges of Studying Abroad**

Studying abroad is often characterized as "life-changing" in many ways: opportunity to advance personal growth, acquire cultural awareness, and gain knowledge about different places and people. Study abroad enables people to see other viewpoints that differ from their own ethnic, national or religious perspectives (Black and Duhon, 2006). It entails a transformation in students' attitudes who often return from such experiences with a broader worldview (Wright and Clarke, 2010). The Institute for the International Education of Students (IES) surveyed alumni from all of its study abroad programs from 1950 to 1999. Data from more than 3400 respondents (a 23% response rate) indicated that studying abroad was indeed a defining moment in the participants' personal lives whose impact were felt years after their experiences (Dwyer, 2004).

At the same time, job markets/employers in many countries recognize study abroad as a differentiating factor in the recruitment process. Global firms find those students who have studied abroad to be more attractive because these applicants already have had exposure to international cultures and can effectively communicate with people from other countries because of their elevated cultural awareness (Leggett, 2011). Applicants are also thought to have higher levels of creative thinking because of their adventurous spirit in studying abroad (Martinez, 2011). In one study, 450 employers were asked to generate a list of traits and competencies gained from study abroad that would be beneficial to the workplace. More than 50% of the respondents listed: "interacting with people who hold different interests/values/perspectives", "understanding cultural differences in the workplace", "adapting to situations of change", and "gaining new knowledge from experiences" (Gardner et al, 2009). SAP also results in higher levels of flexibility/tolerance, perceptual acuity, emotional resilience, and personal autonomy (Black and Duhon, 2006).

Black and Duhon (2006) report that results from a cultural awareness instrument that they administered to 26 business student participants at the beginning and end of a summer SAP in London indicated that the program enhanced students' cultural awareness and personal development, affirming that as a result of their SAP experience, students became more culturally empathetic, tolerant, self-confident, and independent.

Moghaddam, Peyvandi, and Wang (2009) investigated the relationship between three personality traits of risk taking propensity, goal (performance and learning) orientation, and openness to experience of 92 business majors (14 graduate and 78 undergraduates) and their perceptions of the effectiveness of summer abroad course they attended. They found students' goal orientation had some impact on how they perceived the abroad courses. Using Ajzen's *Theory of Planned Behavior* and drawing on responses from 188 business students at a Midwest university in the U.S., Presley, Datha-Martinez and Zhang (2010) found "attitude" "perceived behavioral control," and "subjective norms" to be significant predictors of intention to study abroad. Positive outcomes associated with studying abroad, they discovered, included experiencing a new culture, improvement of language skills, opportunity to grow and develop as a person, new career opportunities, exposure to an interesting or fun experience. Negative outcomes stated by students included homesickness and delay or disruption of academic progress. Cost and availability of financial aid were the biggest concerns.

Finally, in their two separate but related studies, Clark III et al (2009) and Wright and Clark III (2010) surveyed 85 undergraduate U.S. students majoring in business who participated in a semester long, faculty led university sponsored SAP in Belgium and compared them to a similar control group who completed a junior level international course at home. Results showed that SAP helped students become more globally minded.

## METHODOLOGY

The respondents for this online survey were undergraduate students at a private Comprehensive college in upstate New York, with approximately 6500 students. The names and e-mail addresses for the 558 students representing the five schools at the College (i.e. Business, Communications, Health Sciences, Humanities & Sciences, and Music) who had studied abroad between Fall 2009 and Fall 2011 semesters were obtained from the Office of International Programs. A survey questionnaire was designed to include mostly Likert scale questions, as well as some demographic and open-ended questions. Responses were solicited through SurveyMonkey. Results were tabulated and analyzed using SPSS statistical software.

Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Two reminder e-mails were sent to increase participation rate. Students accessed the on line survey through a link provided in the e-mail. Students were required to sign on using their college accounts to ensure they were matriculating students and to prevent multiple completions. A total of 231 students of the above students completed the on-line survey fully, resulting in a response rate of 41%.

It is important to note that, the high percentage of our survey's response rate notwithstanding, the overall participation rate of the undergraduate students at the College mirrors very closely the national average participation rate of their peers in United States. In the last five academic years (2006-07 through 2010-11), according to the data released by the Office of International Programs (OIP) and Registrar, ratios of the undergraduate students from the College participating in study abroad programs of various durations (short, semester or year-long) to the average fulltime students population during the same period have been 9.8%, 8.3%, 8.6%, 9.9% and 8.8%, respectively. These are fairly in line with the latest *Open Doors* survey by Institute of International Education that reported 9.5% of all US undergraduates study abroad in any single academic year. In addition, according to OIP's latest report, approximately 36% of College's students choose to study abroad while earning their undergraduate degree.

In terms of profile, our survey respondents' distribution mirrored closely the underlying student population of the College in terms of students' school affiliations but was skewed more towards the upper class and female students (36% juniors and 54% seniors; 20% male and 80% female). They had participated in SAP in over 30 countries, with majority (38%) choosing the United Kingdom as their destination, followed by Spain (7.5%), China (7%), Australia (6.5%) and Italy (6.5%). Most of the students studied abroad through the College's "affiliated" programs (35.7%), or through the College' own London Center (34.8%).

## FINDINGS

### Selection of a Study Abroad Site: Program-Related Factors

As noted earlier, a number of “program-related” factors play important roles in the determination of whether and where students study abroad. Students and families are concerned about the cost of the program and the availability of financial aid. In addition, students are concerned about the ability to graduate on time, the mix of courses offered by the host institution, relevance of the program and courses offered to their majors’ degree requirements and potential internship opportunities. Of course, many students are also interested in improving their foreign language proficiency and select the locations accordingly.

Respondents in our study were asked about certain “program-related” considerations that influenced their choices by answering a series of scaled questions where the attributes ranged from “Important,” to “Somewhat Important,” “Unimportant,” and “Somewhat Unimportant”, and a “Neutral” category as well! Students were asked to check any and all of the factors that influenced their decisions to study abroad. Results for the top 5 factors are summarized in Table 1. It should be noted that, for simplicity in reporting, the “Important” and “Somewhat Important,” values are combined into one group. Similarly, “the Unimportant,” and “Somewhat Unimportant.” values are added together.

Review of the responses indicate that, from the students’ point of view, the potential impact of a study abroad for personal growth and career improvement prospects is the most important factor with 91% selecting this option (please note that the tables in this paper have been abbreviated because of the page limitation. Hence, some of the figures used in the discussion may not be seen in the tables). Ability to graduate on time (84%) and the length of the program (80%) were the next two influential variables shaping students’ choices. As expected, costs of the program and availability of financial aid did rise to the top, with 74% and 61% of the students rating them as important or somewhat important. On the other hand, surprisingly, only 38% chose their study abroad as an opportunity to develop their foreign language proficiency skills and only 30% of the respondents identified the opportunity to do internship as an influential factor in their decision to study abroad. The former may be the result of relatively large percentage of our sampled students who studied in the second campus of the College in London for the advantages that were alluded to earlier.

**TABLE 1**  
**IMPORTANCE OF PROGRAM-RELATED FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDY ABROAD DECISION (IN PERCENTAGES)**

Factors	SI+I*	SU+U**
Potential impact on personal growth and career improvement prospects	91	2
Ability to graduate on time	84	8
Length of the program (Time spent abroad)	80	6
Costs of the program	74	11
Availability of information and guidance for studying abroad	71	13

\* Somewhat important (SI) and important (I) combined; \*\* somewhat unimportant (SU) and unimportant (U) combined

### Selection of a Study Abroad Site: Non-Program-Related Factors

Our review of literature indicates that the most important “non-program” related factors that impact students’ study abroad decisions are exposure to other cultures, desire to live independently in a foreign environment, and of course travel within the host and surrounding countries. Family background and family encouragement, as well as the recommendations of faculty advisor and friends do also impact

students' decision and choice of locations. Top 5 factors from our study are summarized in Table 2, below.

**TABLE 2**  
**IMPORTANCE OF NON-PROGRAM-RELATED FACTORS IN STUDY ABROAD**  
**DECISION (IN PERCENTAGES)**

Factors	SI+I*	SU+U**
Learning about other cultures	96	1
Learning to be independent in foreign environments	94	2
Travel opportunities within the country	92	2
Learning how to communicate with people from other cultures	88	4
Availability of cultural/historical sites within that country	78	6

\*Somewhat important (SI) and important (I) combined; \*\* somewhat unimportant (SU) and unimportant (U) combined

It is not surprising that “learning about other cultures” is the most important motivational factor in this study as well; about 96% of the respondents selected this factor as the main reason why they studied abroad. Learning how to be independent in foreign environments was the second most important (94%), and travel opportunities within the country (92%) was the third important reason to study abroad. Overall, our findings confirm, for the most part, results of several of other earlier studies on the major factors that typically motivate students to study abroad and their relative importance (Carlson and Widaman, 2002; Noda, 2007; Qinggang et al, 2011).

#### **Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction with the Enrolled Study Abroad Program**

The majority of the students (88%) in our sample spent either the fall or the spring semester in a foreign country. Table 3 summarizes the top factors that influence the level of satisfaction associated with select attributes of the program or the living environment in their country of destination. As before, for simplicity in presentation, “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” categories were combined into one group, similar to “Strongly Disagree” and “Disagree” categories.

**TABLE 3**  
**LEVEL OF SATISFACTION/DISSATISFACTION WITH THE STUDY ABROAD**  
**EXPERIENCE (IN PERCENTAGES)**

Factors	A+SA*	D +SD**
My study abroad experience was culturally very rewarding	99	1
I liked the people of the host country	95	2
I visited a lot of tourist attractions in the host country	94	3
Social life was very exciting in the city that I studied	89	2
I liked the food that the host country offers	86	4

\* Agree (A) and strongly agree (SA) combined; \*\* disagree (D) and strongly disagree (SD) combined

Given the primacy of “learning about other cultures” among non-program related factors that influenced the study abroad decision of the students in our dataset, it is reassuring that 99% of the responded stated that their study abroad experience was culturally very rewarding. They appreciated their interactions with the host country nationals (95%) and enjoyed visits to the many tourist attractions in the host country (94%). They cherished the social life (89%), liked the food (86%), attended many cultural shows (83%), and found the quality of their academic experience very rewarding (78%). The levels of dissatisfactions were rather minimal across most categories.

### **Study Abroad “Outcome” Experiences**

In addition to the various factors that impacted students’ study abroad decisions and their perceived satisfaction with various aspects of living abroad, we were interested in learning about students’ views and reflections on ways that they thought their experience living and studying abroad had influenced their personal and professional development. Top 5 factors are summarized in Table 4.

At the outset, respondents “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with 8 of the 13 scale items in the 90-99 % range. They strongly believed that because of their study abroad experience, they had learned how to deal with unfamiliar circumstances, developed an appreciation and understanding of other cultures, learned to be independent, and gained more global mindedness, interpersonal skills, and tolerance. The entire experience made them more self-confident.

**TABLE 4  
KEY OUTCOMES OF STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE (IN PERCENTAGES)**

<b>Factors</b>	<b>A+SA*</b>	<b>D +SD**</b>
Ability to deal with unfamiliar circumstances	99	0
Appreciation/understanding of other cultures	97	0
Independence	97	0
Global mindedness	93	0
Interpersonal skills	92	1

\* Agree (A) and strongly agree (SA) combined; \*\* disagree (D) and strongly disagree (SD) combined

When asked about personal growth, nearly all (99%) agreed or strongly agreed that study abroad had enhanced their ability to deal with ambiguity and unfamiliar circumstance, 97% felt that it served as a catalyst for their increased maturity and independence, and 91% reported increased sense of self-confidence and tolerance of different points of view. When questioned about intercultural development, 97% of the respondents said that study abroad helped them better appreciate other cultures, 93% felt study abroad instilled in them global mindedness, 92% reported that it increased their interpersonal skills.

### **Results of Further Statistical Analysis**

Two sets of Factor Analyses were conducted in order to group variables. The first one aimed at determining the factors that influenced students in deciding whether to study abroad or not as well as their site selection. The original questions included scales from “Very Important” to “Very Unimportant.” Principles Component Analysis was used as the extraction method. Varimax with Kaiser Normalization rotation method was used that led to the identification of six factors. Total variance explained was 69.5 percent. The alpha coefficient indicated that reliability of the factors. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling was computed to be 0.666, a satisfactory value for further analysis. The detailed findings are summarized in Table 5, below.

**TABLE 5**  
**IMPORTANCE OF DIFFERENT CRITERIA IN THE STUDY ABROAD DECISION**

	<b>Factor Loadings</b>
<b>Factor 1: Cultural Understanding and Personal Growth</b>	
Learning how to communicate with people from other cultures	.847
Learning about other cultures	.808
Potential impact for personal growth and career improvement prospects	.582
Learning how to be independent in foreign environments	.567
The challenges of living in a foreign country	.513
<b>Factor 2: Cost/Affordability</b>	
Availability of financial aid	.911
Costs of the program	.880
<b>Factor 3: Travel Opportunities</b>	
Travel opportunities to other countries in the region	.827
Travel opportunities within the country	.813

In general, the results of our multivariate analyses confirm findings reported in Tables 1 and 2 on the major “program” and “non-program” criteria that influenced students’ study abroad. In addition, the rankings of those attributes as reported in the univariate analyses of Tables 1 & 2 are consistent with the factor loadings weights above, such as those associated with cross-cultural learning, costs of the program and availability of financial program, or potential impact on personal growth and career improvements. Similarly, results of the Factor Analyses on key factors influencing the locational choices of students in our sample were in line with many of the earlier studies such as Black and Duhon (2006) and Wright and Clark (2010).

The second Factor Analysis aimed at determining those variables that had an impact on the students while studying abroad. The original questions included a “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree” Likert scale. Principles Component Analysis was used as the extraction method. Varimax with Kaiser Normalization rotation method was used to identify six factors. Total variance explained was 66 percent. The alpha coefficient indicated that reliability of the factors. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling was computed to be 0.822, a satisfactory value for further analysis. The detailed findings are summarized in Table 6, below.

**TABLE 6**  
**THE IMPACT OF THE STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM**

	<b>Factor Loadings</b>
<b>Factor 1: Cultural Tolerance</b>	
Tolerance of people from different cultural backgrounds	.858
Tolerance for different points of view	.855
Tolerance for different ways of doing things	.819
Appreciation/understanding of other cultures	.701
Study abroad experience was culturally very rewarding	.452
<b>Factor 2: Personal Attitudinal Experiences</b>	

**TABLE 6**  
**THE IMPACT OF THE STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM**

	<b>Factor Loadings</b>
Self confidence	.816
Independence	.783
Ability to deal with unfamiliar circumstances	.727
Interpersonal skills	.709
<b>Factor 3: Living Condition Attractiveness</b>	
Liked the that the host country offers	.687
Finding a house/flat/room was difficult	-.632
Lived in harmony with roommates	.629
Weather conditions were excellent in the host city	.530
Understanding of the role of the U.S. in world affairs	.738

Similar to the earlier analyses on factors influencing choice of study abroad locations, the above factor loading related to the satisfaction with (or lack thereof) and impact of study abroad experiences are in line with results reported in Tables 3 and 4, with all but five loading into various factor groupings. Our Factor Analysis results are in concert with findings of earlier empirical studies such as those reported by Dwyer (2004), Clark et al (2009) and Wright and Clark III (2010).

The choice of location to study abroad was another component of this study. The location factor was investigated in three broad categories. Namely, English speaking countries (UK, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Canada), all European countries except the UK, and all other countries.

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was applied to test whether there were significant differences among the above three groups of countries using factor scores from the 13 (6+7) factors identified earlier using a 5% significance level. The findings are summarized below:

1. Country groups showed a significant difference with respect to Cultural Tolerance Factor ( $F(2,162) = 4.30$   $p<0.05$ ). Students who studied in "Other" countries found the cultural tolerance experience more rewarding than those who studied in "English Speaking" and "Other European" countries. It should be noted that this factor was the most important one (Factor 1) in terms of the impact of studying abroad since it had the highest level of variance explained.
2. Country groups showed a significant difference with respect to the "Living Condition Attractiveness (food, housing, weather)" factor [ $F(2,162) = 13.034$ ,  $p <0.001$ ]. Students who studied in European countries found the living condition attractiveness better than in English-speaking countries. Students who studied in other countries also found the living condition attractiveness better than in English-speaking countries.
3. Country groups showed a significant difference with respect to the "Travel Opportunities" factor [ $F(2,168) = 13.129$   $p<0.001$ ]. Students who studied in English-speaking countries found travel opportunities better than in "other" countries. Students who studied in "Other European" countries also found travel opportunities better than in "Other" countries. One explanation of this is that there is little language barrier in (English is commonly spoken in European countries) the European countries that makes travel much easier. In addition, the proximity, size, and existence of a well-developed travel network in Europe facilitate travel.
4. Country groups showed a significant difference with respect to "Cultural Understanding and Personal Growth" factor [ $F(2,168) = 7.1$ ,  $p<0.05$ ]. Students who studies in "Other" countries found the "cultural understanding and personal growth" experience more rewarding than those who studied in "English-speaking" and "Other European" countries.
5. Country groups showed a significant difference with respect to the "Information Availability and Safety Considerations" factor [ $F(2,168) = 4.51$ ,  $p<0.05$ ]. Students who studied in English-

speaking countries found the information more readily available for these countries than “Other European” and “Other” countries.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings, while based on a survey at one institution and largely Caucasian student population, confirmed results of a number of other earlier studies reviewed before while at the same time uncovering, with greater details and specificity of categories, programmatic and other factors that shaped students' decisions and their satisfactions. In general, our respondents felt they had become more globally minded, gained higher levels of intercultural sensitivities, and became more confident in dealing with issues in unfamiliar environments by the end of their study abroad experience. Findings of our study confirmed the long-term impact of study abroad on students' personal, professional, and academic lives. They show that study abroad positively and unequivocally influences the career path, world-view, and self-confidence of students. These are indeed critical skills that are increasingly important in the rapidly changing, multicultural marketplace that they will encounter upon graduation.

Two years ago, the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Act was passed as an initiative to further promote the practice of studying abroad while in secondary and higher education. The concept of the legislation was based upon the vision that an experience such as studying abroad is an essential element to the quality of education (NAFSA, 2011). The argument behind the legislation is that study abroad opportunities are “effective in helping students develop practical skills that complement classroom learning”, including a tolerance for ambiguity, analytical skills, and improved problem solving. The specific goals of the program were to increase to one million U.S. students studying abroad each year within the next ten years, encourage diversity in student participation in study abroad, diversify locations of study abroad, particularly in non-traditional countries, and encourage a greater commitment by institutions of higher education to expand study abroad opportunities (NAFSA, 2011).

Although findings of numerous studies confirm the variety of benefits associated with study abroad experiences, and while the study abroad by students enrolled in U.S. higher education has more than tripled over the past two decades, only 1.4% of all U.S. students enrolled in all levels of U.S. higher education and 9.5% of all US undergraduates study abroad in any single academic year according to the latest *Open Doors* survey by Institute of International Education. Consequently, while the college in this study has an active Office of International Programs and its students' near parity with the US participation rate of undergraduate students in SAP (9.1% vs. 9.4%, respectively), there is still a large percentage of students in the College studied (approximately 64%) who do not study abroad. Therefore, in the interest of increasing students' participation rate and promoting the quantity and quality of the SAP at this Comprehensive college and elsewhere, it is suggested that the academic affairs and student affairs officials:

- Custom design and promote programs that appeal to the widest spectrum of students with varying curricular and geographic interests as well as time and financial constraints.
- Take steps to inform students about financial aid availability and related qualification requirements.
- Engage in systematic communication programs designed to inform students about benefits of SAP to include highlighting the benefits of opening new career opportunities, gaining an opportunity to grow and develop as a person, and exposure to fun and interesting experiences.

The Factor Analysis conducted indicated that “Cultural Understanding and Personal Growth” were the most important criteria in the study abroad decisions of the students. When investigating the impact of a study abroad, the perceived “Cultural Tolerance” and “Personal Attitudinal Change” experiences were most important factors. Further statistical analysis showed the location of study abroad site was important. In terms of travel, students found the English-Speaking and other European countries more attractive. However, students felt that studying in “other” countries was more valuable in terms of cultural experience.

In terms of directions for future research, we plan to build on the exploratory nature of this study and collect more data for a national sample and study regional and socio-economic differences and similarities, as well as investigating demographic and income backgrounds of the students who have studied abroad.

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