

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
Study Abroad Curriculum Integration

International Education for Undergraduates

**Focus Group Data Summary
Non-Study Abroad Students, Spring 2002**

I. Executive Summary

As we begin work on Study Abroad Curriculum Integration at the University of Minnesota, it is important to understand students' current thinking in relation to this initiative. What we found out through a series of focus groups with students who have not yet studied abroad is that study abroad, almost unanimously, is associated with the opportunity to travel, to see the world, to learn about other cultures, and, ideally, to concurrently fulfill degree requirements. Students who have not yet studied abroad primarily speak about the traveling or vacation aspects, focusing almost exclusively on the extracurricular facets of study abroad rather than the formal educational components of the experience. Cost and location are the two most frequently cited concerns or issues when discussing study abroad and are the overriding determining factors when University of Minnesota students consider an international educational experience. Academic fit (in the case of credits transferring, being able to graduate within four years, etc.) is also a primary factor in determining whether or not to study abroad. Students who have not studied abroad, for the most part, conceive of and define study abroad as a means to an end; that of experiential cultural immersion rather than as an end in itself, that of expanded curricular opportunities. Consequently, the *where* of study abroad (country, city, etc.) is a much greater issue to these students than the *what* of study abroad (what school, what courses, etc.).

These responses should not be surprising given the infancy of the University of Minnesota's Study Abroad Curriculum Integration initiative. Students cite other students as being their primary source of information and their focus is on what countries to go to, what areas to visit, etc. Although students have routinely been exposed to study abroad materials, have routinely spoken with advisers and professors, and have routinely been provided with opportunities to learn about study abroad programs and curriculum, the academic linkages are disconnected, and students have not internalized the curricular advantages of studying abroad. This is a significant area for focus as the Study Abroad Curriculum Integration moves forward. Not only must the University address the many barriers to study abroad, it must also help to explain the educational benefits of study abroad opportunities. Only then will more students be prepared to integrate what they learn while abroad, thereby expanding and deepening the educational and curricular impact of the study abroad experience, and making study abroad attractive to more students.

II. Study Overview

In support of the University of Minnesota's Study Abroad Curriculum Integration initiative and as part of the evaluation process of the Bush Foundation grant, the Global Campus held four focus groups with students who had not yet studied abroad to determine what they think about study abroad and how it might fit into their undergraduate education.

Eight students participated in the sessions, which were held on the Minneapolis and St. Paul campuses of the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. Recruitment for the sessions occurred by means of mass e-mails to students by way of their advisers. Sessions were scheduled for 60 minutes. A copy of the questions can be found in Appendix A.

III. Student Perceptions

Focus group sessions began by asking students what three words or phrases immediately come to their minds when they think about studying abroad. While the actual words varied, responses can easily be grouped into the following categories, listed by frequency of response:

- Expensive/cost
- Traveling/vacation
- Cultural exploration
- Academic fit

Expensive/Cost

The issue of cost is of primary importance to almost all students we spoke with. Students are concerned about affording study abroad and are interested in finding out about scholarships and financial aid. As this is a well-known issue in relation to study abroad, we shall not dwell on it here.

Travel and Vacation

For many students, study abroad is synonymous with "getting away" and with going to "see the world." The prevalence of this sort of response should not be surprising, but it also should not be misconstrued as a frivolous response or expectation on the part of students. Follow-up questions about the added value of studying abroad, and how that may differ from simply traveling abroad, provide significant nuance to the notion of travel and vacationing and how students perceive the role of studying abroad in meeting those goals. For more on this issue, see the discussion on the perceived differences between travel and studying abroad below.

Cultural Exploration

"Studying abroad is getting to know another culture." This sentence sums up responses that address issues of cultural exploration, "expanding one's horizons," and the multitude of responses that fall under this category. Students' primary expectations about the experiential value of studying abroad focus almost entirely on this notion of cultural exploration. Quite simply, student's visceral response to the *why* of study abroad is cultural immersion and exploration. This may seem directly contradictory to the desire to travel. This, too, will be explained in further detail below. "Beyond just the school itself . . . in your own time you go out,

you see the city, you hang out with other people from that place.” Hanging out, however, is not as trite as it may at first sound. In the words of the students, fundamental to the notion of a successful study abroad experience is the opportunity to learn about and experience, first hand, another culture. “Even if you are learning about culture in the classroom, it’s going to be reinforced if you actually go out and participate.” The key word here is “participate,” and it is as a participatory activity that students who have not studied abroad perceive the experience. “When I was looking at (studying abroad) I saw it as a pathway . . . for me it was a way of getting out and seeing more of the world . . . it seems like (it) would be kind of a way to introduce yourself into the culture.” Study abroad is not a passive enterprise. It is wholly active and wholly interactive. In the words of one student, “study abroad binds you to the culture.” It is understood to be a significant life-changing cultural experience.

Academic Fit

Academic fit—graduating on time, transferring credits, etc.—is important to students who have not yet studied abroad. “The reason I want to go abroad is to have fun and interact with people . . . but I do also want to get credits out of the way; I don’t want to be spending time not getting enough credits.” There is an underlying notion of risk implicit within this statement. If the experience somehow does not fulfill academic requirements, it is perceived as a waste of time. Many students spoke openly about the “risks” of studying abroad, all of them centered on wasting money or time by not addressing the issue of academic fit. One political science student’s comments about why she never studied abroad are especially telling. “I’m thinking about going to Law School and that wasn’t necessarily going to be expanded on if I did that sort of preparation in someplace other than America. And I had opportunities to do other things here. . . (studying abroad) would have been stepping out of what I thought was the path that I needed to take to get done directly . . . I signed that four year graduation guarantee . . . and I don’t think it said that you couldn’t study abroad, but if you didn’t maintain progress towards graduation, you wouldn’t be guaranteed to be done in four years, and . . . I wanted to be done and move on after that.” Studying abroad for this student does not fit into the path that she had identified for herself and her undergraduate career. Even though this same student spoke eloquently about the advantages of studying abroad, ultimately the possibility that doing so might not fit into her plan is a risk that she is unwilling to take. We must address the notion of academic fit, allaying students’ concerns of “losing a semester” or “losing the opportunity to take classes that are offered at the University.” Otherwise we will be unable to meet the needs of many students who are inclined to study abroad but believe it to be too risky.

IV. Sources of Information

Because the issues of academic fit and cost are so important to students, they must repeatedly hear that there are viable solutions to their concerns. All of the students that we spoke with indicated that they heard about the variety of study abroad opportunities, that they saw the flyers and bulletins, that they spoke with their advisers and professors, etc. etc. And yet, when asked what they needed to hear and know before they would study abroad, students listed the following, again in order of frequency:

- Cost, including *accurate* information about the availability of scholarships and financial aid
- Location (the variety of places to go, statistics about where students have gone in the past, what other students’ experiences have been in those areas, etc.)

- Academic fit (“I need assurance [that I can] get out in four, four 1/2 years”)
- Length of program
- Registration process
- Deadlines

Students cited other students as the most frequent source of information (and misinformation), and to that extent, studying abroad remains a complex and daunting idea. Accuracy of information is important; as well as how the information is presented and broken down for students. “I went to the study abroad office my Sophomore year and looked at it, but it was completely overwhelming . . . It rang true that you could go wherever you want and see whatever you want to see . . . and it was like, well I sure can, but I have no idea where to start . . . I think that’s a big reason why I didn’t do it.” Because the range of possibilities is so broad, most of the students we spoke with believe that participation in study abroad, including finding out information and registering to participate, fundamentally requires self-motivation and self-direction. This requirement, in addition to the perceived risk of studying abroad in the first place, was enough to dissuade several students from pursuing information about study abroad opportunities.

V. Study Abroad vs. Traveling Abroad

“When you look into (studying abroad) . . . (place) is the only thing that people tell you about, where to study [what country], all the different places, where to go. It sounds bad, but you never hear about . . . the specific schools, or the courses that they offer.”

The second most frequently cited top-of-mind responses to what University of Minnesota students think about when they hear the words “study abroad” were traveling and vacation. And yet, this seems to implicitly contradict the importance that they place on the notion of cultural exploration. Because of this perceived tension in their responses, we asked students what was the added value to studying abroad; or to put it another way, if the primary concern is visiting a *place* then why not simply travel there, why study abroad at all?

Their answers provide a nuanced understanding of the role of study abroad in the minds of our undergraduate students. “The structure . . . you’re sort of signing up for the chance to have your hand held, at least part of the way . . . maybe not in the classes that you’re going to take, but once you’re enrolled in an institution, you’re accountable. If you just go to travel, you’re working in your own schedule, seeing whatever you want to see with whomever you’re traveling with.” Another student said, “I feel like I can travel on my own, but getting a guide while you’re there is why I would travel through study abroad, because maybe you will be guided through it more . . . maybe you’ll have more opportunities . . . they’ll know you’re a student so they’ll know that you’ll want a more intense experience with the culture and with just anything out there . . . they’ll know that you’re there as a serious person who wants to take in a lot more.”

Guidance, support, and an entryway into more *significant* cultural immersion are the added values of studying abroad. Study abroad students, in the words of the second student quoted above, are taken more seriously, and are legitimized, in a way, by the fact that they are studying while abroad. While the literal truth of this statement may be argued, it rang true for many of the students we spoke with. “Study abroad binds you to the culture.” Traveling, in the minds of the

University of Minnesota students we spoke with, cannot accomplish this. It is the fact that students are there as learners, and identified as such, coupled with the support structure that study abroad offers that leads to the life-changing cultural experience all of them cite as the reason to study abroad.

VI. Curriculum Integration

So where does this leave the curriculum? For the most part, nowhere. When students speak about the *study* of study abroad, they speak in terms of cultural immersion. When asked how study abroad fits into their undergraduate education, their responses include that it looks good on a resume, that it is an “easy out” for language requirements, and that it provides an opportunity to “get out of here” for awhile. The most direct and articulated response to the curricular concerns of studying abroad is that “study abroad is an augmented educational experience [rather] than something that is the natural progression of what you’re doing.”

This gets to the core of the Study Abroad Curriculum Integration dilemma. Until the experiential *and* curricular importance of study abroad can be articulated and shared with students, integration of study abroad into the curriculum of the University of Minnesota will never be achieved. If study abroad is only considered to be an “augmented educational experience,” it will never move into the center of the curriculum. Given the push towards four year graduation rates, the barriers of cost and academic fit, and the general feeling that even researching study abroad requires self-motivation and self-direction, there is significant work ahead to change the campus climate into a position where students do not think twice about studying abroad because it is fundamental to the “natural progression” of a University of Minnesota undergraduate degree.

Prepared by Matt Sumera, President’s Emerging Leader Program, 2001-2002

Appendix A

Focus Group Questions

Non-Study Abroad Students, Spring 2002

Opening Questions

To start, please jot down on a piece of paper the first three things that come to mind when you think of “Study Abroad.” (Pause and allow students time to think) Now, please introduce yourself, tell us your college and major, and read what you wrote down? We’ll be jotting down your thoughts on this flipchart.

Take some time to look at the flip chart and think about what general themes and issues appear there. (Pause to give time to think) Why did you think those items came to your minds? (Facilitation of discussion) What does this tell us about your thinking as it relates to study abroad?

Transition Questions

Let’s change gears for a moment. What information, if any, have you received about study abroad and from whom or where?

- orientation
- advisers
- professors
- posters, catalogs
- friends

What would you need to hear or learn before you would participate in study abroad?

Key Questions

- Do you think study abroad is different than travelling abroad and if so, how?
- How do you see study abroad fitting into your undergraduate education?

Ending questions

- What don’t you know about study abroad that you would like to know?
- Are there any issues that we’ve missed?