

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
Study Abroad Curriculum Integration

International Education for Undergraduates

**Focus Group Data Summary
Past Study Abroad Participants, Fall 2001**

I. Executive Summary

As we begin work on Study Abroad Curriculum Integration throughout the University of Minnesota system, it is important to understand students' current thinking in relation to this initiative. Through a series of focus groups with past study abroad participants we discovered that students' notions of curriculum integration as it pertains to the study abroad experience are quite indistinct. Students do not think about integrating what they will learn before they leave to study abroad. They do not think about curriculum integration while they are abroad, and consequently, they are ill-equipped to integrate what they have learned when they return to campus. In addition, they do not feel that it is the responsibility of either professors or the institution to aid in the integration of curriculum. According to the majority of the students we spoke with, the most a student should expect from the University is a flexible professor who will allow them to change paper topics to reflect and draw upon their experiences, if appropriate. The students placed the onus for integration squarely upon themselves.

What complicates this notion, of course, is that students are not thinking about integration. Even though they almost unanimously define curriculum integration as their "responsibility," it simply is not something with which they are concerned. What they do worry about are technical issues rather than curricular concerns, such as obtaining credit for courses (major or ideally degree credit) or graduating "on-time".

This is the paradox of integrating study abroad into the curriculum—students believe that any sort of integration should be their responsibility even though this is a responsibility that they do not acknowledge.

At the beginning of a large initiative such as the University of Minnesota's Study Abroad Curriculum Integration, these kinds of ambiguous and underdeveloped notions of responsibilities, priorities, etc. should not be surprising. And while it would be nice to think that students who participate in study abroad have detailed, firm notions of how they want to integrate the "what" of studying abroad, this is not yet the case. What follows is an explanation, however, of what currently *is* the case. What follows will hopefully provide insight into how our students currently think about study abroad, what they want out of the experience, and what they feel they "get" out of it. Hopefully the following will inform the curriculum integration process so that students' notions of integration develop and the educational aspects of studying abroad will become as important to them as the experiential.

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 three focus groups with past study abroad participants to determine to what extent their study abroad experiences have been integrated into their undergraduate education.

Eighteen 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 who had returned from their study abroad experience at least one semester prior. We utilized this recruitment strategy to ensure that students had time to both go through the "re-entry" process and the opportunity to integrate (or think about integrating) what they had learned studying abroad into their on-campus undergraduate studies. Sessions were scheduled for 75 minutes. A copy of the questions can be found in Appendix A.

In general, the sessions progressed from broad questions about how studying abroad affected students to more specific ones about how students have been able to use what they learned studying abroad since their return to campus. For the most part, conversations were lively and students were engaged in the discussion topics. While almost all students were interested in discussing their study abroad experiences, many were less interested or unable to discuss how they have been able to integrate those experiences into their studies since they have returned to campus.

III. The Academic Effects of Studying Abroad

The student participants overwhelmingly reported satisfaction with their study abroad experiences. The general question--"How has studying abroad affected you?"-- elicited typical responses. Students reported that they gained a more profound perspective of the world and their place within it; that the experience provided them with the opportunity to self-reflect, both about themselves and their home country; and that they gained a deeper respect for people from other cultures. The students' comments speak for themselves. "I developed a pretty intense respect and admiration for non-Western cultures while I was gone . . . I was really exposed to their outlook, culture, the way they viewed the world, their religion . . . Not that I wasn't [sic] somehow not tolerant before I left, but I think I've developed an even more, fairly intense tolerance for people who think very much differently than I do." Another student said, "I really learned who I was when I was abroad . . . because I was removed from my friends here and the U and the familiarity of the United States . . . I realized the trends in my personality, and what I did and didn't like to do . . . (I realized) that's who I really am."

Responses to questions about the effect that study abroad had on students' academic careers were much broader. While some students took courses that they defined as directly applicable to their field of study, a majority of the students reported that the courses they took were entirely independent from their core academic study.

What students learned from their coursework abroad also varied but can be generalized into three main categories. Students reported that they learned content that:

- would have been identical to coursework in the States;
- could have never been learned had they not studied abroad; or

- was not as important as the way they learned it (i.e., pedagogical differences impacted the “what” and the “how” of the content students learned).

The second and third of these categories resonated most with the students. Several students reported taking advantage of humanities courses specific to the country they were studying in, providing them with an opportunity to learn more about the artistic, political, historical, or social aspects of the country. These courses proved to be illuminating for the students and were generally thought to be beneficial. A physics major studying in Australia spoke in depth about one of these courses. “The one (course) that I learned a lot of stuff that I really wouldn’t have learned here was Australian Cinema. Because beyond Mad Max and Crocodile Dundee . . . I didn’t even realize that Australian Cinema even existed . . . That was one of those things that really changed my perspective on the US . . . I learned a lot about the whole notion of cultural imperialism, how American culture is sort of, in the view of a lot of people, trying to conquer the world . . . Australian cinema was basically drowned out of existence by Hollywood . . . and I would have really never learned that, or even had any reason to, had I not been there.”

In a few cases, students reported that they developed an interest in some aspect of their study abroad courses to the point they were continuing their research or doing their senior projects on like content. In one case, a Plant Biology major who had done some research while studying in Australia had applied and was accepted to do research at the University of Minnesota typically only offered to graduate students.

The pedagogical differences, in numerous cases, had a more significant educational impact on the students than the content they learned. Several students reported that the more self-directed structure of study overseas was something that really affected the way they learned. Some relished this structure while others found it more demanding. In general, all reported that having the opportunity to study in a differently structured educational environment has had a lasting impact on their approach to their education. Many reported being less “stressed” about courses since they have returned, especially about taking exams because of the reliance upon exams in assigning grades in their study abroad classes. Several reported that they learned how to be better students, more self-motivated, and more interested in their education because of the pedagogical differences they encountered studying abroad. “Nothing prepared me for the actual doing of the work, but it made me a better student now because I now know how to fully, fully integrate really heavy research into a paper,” reported one student. Another went so far as to suggest that American students are “spoon fed” during their education—an observation he made after having to take greater control over his studies while abroad.

A vast majority of the students, when asked how studying abroad has affected their undergraduate education, reported that the “experiences” they had outside of the classroom had a much more significant impact than what they learned in class. The term “experiences” was ambiguously defined and most students had a difficult time expounding upon its meaning. It was not uncommon for students to report that “the *total experience* was just so important,” without really being able to further define what that means. Again, one student’s comment speaks for itself: “It was the experience, not so much the academics, that influenced me so much. I didn’t have huge academic goals . . . I mainly was looking for the experience.”

IV. Student Expectations

By and large, students' expectations of what it meant to study abroad and what they would learn studying abroad were formed by other students. Word of mouth (between friends, classmates, siblings) influenced and shaped student expectations far more than did conversations with professors or advisers. Numerous students reported having never even spoken with an adviser or professor before studying abroad. Said one student, "I spoke with a Spanish professor and a couple of advisers in the international office, but again I think it was mostly friends of mine who had been to Latin America, and it was my own desire to see something else." Recruitment, if it can be given that name, was primarily the purview of past study abroad participants. Many of the students did report that they saw Global Campus publications throughout campus, but these students seemed to have already determined that studying abroad was something that they wanted to do.

In two instances, however, students received e-mails from their colleges about studying abroad and reported that they had never thought about taking advantage of such an opportunity before. The only reason they investigated study abroad was because of the e-mails that they received.

V. Integrating Study Abroad

The study techniques and styles that students gained while studying abroad clearly transferred back to their on-campus studies and almost unanimously proved to be beneficial. Integration of curriculum was an altogether different story. As previously reported, several students indicated that the courses they took were outside their area of study. Naturally, they found this to be a barrier to integrating what they learned abroad since they did not take related classes upon returning to the University.

What was lacking for almost all students was a method and the context with which to integrate what they had learned abroad into their undergraduate studies. While a few, as previously addressed, were doing senior or research projects directly because of their study abroad experiences, most reported that the two educational experiences were separate. Several students defined study abroad as a chance to "get away," to "go see the world," and there was some resistance from this contingency to even think about integrating what they had learned while they were "away." As one student said, "I don't think it's the professor's role to try and get you, to force you, to try to discuss . . . what happened in your life outside . . . when you went over there. I think the fact that . . . it's a completely independent journey that you're taking . . . the fact that you went over there and you did that on your own reconnaissance, it makes their input into the situation unnecessary." Study abroad, in essence, was a sacrosanct experience that should not be subject to institutional interference.

When asked what professors or the administration could do to ensure better integration, students, for the most part, had little input. The standard concerns about transfer of credits, affordability, and so on were raised, but few students had insights about how to integrate the knowledge gained while studying abroad into the classroom or throughout the institution. Some suggested that professors could contact students prior to the start of the semester to get some background information about their students, including whether they had studied abroad, and then use that

information to imbue their courses with content specific to the course audience. Others were extremely resistant to that idea (as was the student quoted above) and were concerned about being put “on the spot” during discussions of issues that they may have particular knowledge about because of their experiences living and studying abroad. For the most part, students suggested integration techniques such as forums for students interested in studying abroad, with panels of past study abroad participants providing information.

VI. Conclusion

The focus groups that were held in the Fall semester 2001 will be repeated in 2002 and 2003. These groups will again address the topic of curriculum integration of the study abroad experience. In this way, the results of the Fall 2001 focus groups will be used in two major ways:

- They will function as a baseline for future curriculum integration analysis; and
- They will inform the ongoing work of the University of Minnesota’s Study Abroad Curriculum Integration initiative.

We have learned a great deal from these sessions and the focus groups have raised some significant issues. Primarily, we have identified the current level of student thinking as it relates to curriculum integration. That students’ thinking about curriculum integration is as underdeveloped as it is raises several important follow-up–questions at this point in the development of the program that are useful to raise:

- What is the role of faculty and advisers before students study abroad?
- How can study abroad be integrated more into academic planning?
- Why is there such a difference between the perceived value of the personal and academic experience of studying abroad?
- How best could curriculum integration occur at every stage of the study abroad experience?

Again, since this initiative is in its infancy, it is not surprising that we do not yet have answers. Future focus groups can be used to help answer these and other questions in order to provide a more in-depth understanding of the challenges of synthesizing the educational content and the personal experience of studying abroad. Clearly there is a difference—audible even in the words of the students who were most resistant to or most unable to discuss curriculum integration—between studying abroad and travelling abroad. The goal of future focus groups with past study abroad participants should be to tease out what that difference is, in the students’ opinion, in order to determine the added value of actually studying abroad. Once these students can better articulate the academic values of study abroad, the University can help to enhance and integrate those aspects across the institution. This will go a long way to ensuring the success of curriculum integration.

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

Appendix A

Focus Group Questions Past Study Abroad Participants, Fall 2001

Opening Question

- To start off with, please introduce yourself and tell us your major and where you SA.

Introductory Questions

- How has Studying Abroad (SA) affected you?
- How has SA affected your undergraduate education?
- Thinking back to when you first contemplated studying abroad, what did you expect to learn from the experience?
- How were those expectations developed? What did your advisers/professors say? What did fellow students say?

Transition Question

- Specifically thinking about your education and your major, did you learn anything studying abroad that you think you would not have learned if you had stayed on campus?

Key Questions

- Returning to the US, have you been able to integrate what you learned during your SA experience in your University courses/area of study?
- If you were a professor, how would you ensure that your SA students had the opportunity to use what they had learned studying abroad in your classroom.
- If you were the President of the University, how would you ensure that SA was integrated at an institutional level?

Ending Questions

- (After providing a summary of the conversation) Is this an accurate summary?
- Are there any issues that we have missed?