

STUDY ABROAD IN THE RECREATION CURRICULUM: A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

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The purpose of this mixed-method study was to investigate student perceptions towards study abroad. In particular, attitudes, motivations, and perceived barriers were investigated using a survey instrument. The impacts of short term, faculty-led study abroad programs were analyzed using semi-structured interviews and grounded theory. The survey instrument was administered to 240 students enrolled in recreation classes in the fall of 2008. Data were analyzed using a statistical software package and showed that students were in general very interested in study abroad and perceived money and time as their main constraints to do so. The most popular programs were found to be short term programs with faculty and students from the same university, with the most attractive locations being Western Europe followed by Central America. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with fifteen students who studied abroad through a large public university in winter 2009, several themes emerged pertaining to impacts on student learning and development. The constant comparison method of grounded theory revealed that students felt an increase in self-confidence, became more socially aware, and changed their perspective towards the country visited as well as what it means to be American. All students felt their experience was beneficial and would recommend it to their friends. Following the tradition of grounded theory, a model of the study abroad process was developed. The model includes barriers and motives to studying abroad, the actual experience, and impacts derived from it. The needs for debriefing students upon their return as well as other implications for further research and study abroad administrators are discussed.

Study-abroad has become a valued experience in American colleges and universities for students, professors, and administrators alike (Farrell, 2007). With schools providing more access to study abroad programs, students have more variety in selecting a program that will fit with their needs. However, while 80% of Americans believe that study abroad is important, only one percent actually participates each year (Hubbs, 2006). Approximately 190,000 students study abroad each year, and more than 30,000 students and recent graduates of U.S. colleges and universities participate yearly in work abroad programs, internships, volunteer assignments, teaching positions, and paid summer jobs abroad (Hubbs, 2006). It is growing in popularity (Gardner & Witherell, 2004). This trend is partly due to the fact that students and institutions of

higher education are becoming increasingly aware that an international education is necessary to function effectively in a global environment. By 2016, about one million American students will be studying abroad each year, a goal set by the Lincoln Commission (Farrell, 2007).

Study abroad, in particular, has been researched since the mid 1950's (Herman, 1996). The end of World War II brought a great interest in global affairs both in the United States and internationally. In Europe, the French president Charles de Gaulle and the German chancellor Konrad Adenauer signed into effect treaties of German-French cooperation in 1963. The German-French Youth Association was further set up in 1963 as part of the Elysée Contract with the aim of ending the age old German-French opposition. In particular, article two of the contract

states: "The youth office has the task of tightening the bonds between youth of both countries and deepening the understanding of each other; to this end to stimulate, promote and where necessary enforce youth movement and youth exchange" (as cited in Office Franco-Allemand pour la Jeunesse, n.d.). The association has since enabled about eight million youths to participate in close to 300,000 exchange programs. While this program has been very successful in promoting peace through tourism, other research has shown negative or ambivalent results of attitude change through tourism (Pizam, Jafari & Milman, 1991; Krippendorf, 1982; Nyaupane, Teye & Paris, 2008).

Nonetheless, the benefits of study abroad to the individual have been widely researched and are well known (Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Carsello & Greaser, 1976). Several studies refer to positive impacts of study abroad (Morgan, 1975; Nash, 1976; Stephenson, 1999). Various studies have shown that studying abroad leads to personal growth (Baty & Dold, 1977; Todd, 2001; Farell & Suvedi, 2003). A recent study on cultural awareness administered through a pre- and post-test design to business student participants of a summer study abroad program in London, England indicates that the program enhances cultural awareness and personal development (Black & Duhon, 2006). Another study finds that students studied abroad to enhance their cross-cultural skills, to become more proficient in the subject matter, and to socialize. Impacts include improvement in the students' overall cross-cultural skills and global understanding but more importantly, the goal to study abroad influences the intensity of the outcomes. The authors conclude that the greater the desire to study abroad, the greater the increase in cultural competence and global awareness (Kitsantas, 2004).

If educators in the field of recreation and leisure studies are truly going to contribute to the goal of the Lincoln Commission and have more students study abroad, there is a need for knowledge about what types of programs would attract the most students. However, little is known about why students hesitate to study abroad and what would motivate them to do so. This study examined college students' interest in, and perceived

barriers to, studying abroad as well as the impacts of the programs.

METHOD

This study used a mixed-method approach. In depth, semi-structured interviews were held with fifteen students that had just completed a short-term study abroad program to assess the impacts these programs had on them. Quantitative data were collected to assess the perceived barriers, interests and motivations of students to study abroad. An electronic survey was administered to 240 undergraduate students enrolled in classes in the recreation and leisure studies program of a public university in the western United States in the fall of 2008. The survey was pilot tested twice in order to ensure reliability and validity. After making several adjustments, the final survey proved to test reliably over time and accurately tested what it was supposed to measure. The questionnaire consisted of demographic information including Likert-type scales of interest in, and perceived barriers to, studying abroad. The scales ranged from one (not at all interested) to five (extremely interested). Furthermore, students were asked to rank interest in short and long-term off campus study and destinations. The sample consisted of 240 usable surveys, of which 30% were males and 70% were females, which approximates U.S. college enrollment by gender. Recreation majors comprised 57% of the sample and non-majors in General Education classes offered by the Recreation Department comprised 43% of the sample. The majority of students taking the survey were upper classmen. Forty percent of the sample were juniors and 38% seniors.

In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the impacts of study abroad programs, qualitative data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with students who returned from short-term, faculty-led study abroad trips during the 2009 winter session. The pre-structured interview guide used by the researcher ensured that all research questions were adequately answered, and specifically asked about feelings towards the study abroad class, if and how the class has changed them, what they learned from their study abroad class, and if their perspective towards the host country changed.

Using purposive sampling, the researchers added more diversity to the sample with each new interviewee by including male and female students, students who had previously studied

abroad and students who just returned from their first overseas trip, as well as students who went to locations as diverse as Greece, Tanzania, or Belize (Charmaz, 2006). The fifteen interviews were taped and transcribed. Pseudonyms were given to each student in the process of transcribing, in order to protect their identities and ensure confidentiality. The constant comparative method of grounded theory was used to analyze data (Creswell, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). These authors proposed a three-fold coding process consisting of open coding, axial coding and selective coding. In open coding, the researcher identifies, labels, and names different phenomena by carefully reading the textual data numerous times. Step two in this process is known as axial coding, and refers to the process of relating the different codes or categories to each other. Selective coding is the final step in the process of creating a theory. The researcher selects one core category (or theme) and describes how all phenomena and categories are related. Following the constant comparative method, the researcher codes the different cases and different categories, which are constantly compared with each other, the emerging themes and theory. Data were triangulated in multiple ways. Member checks allowed the students to re-read the transcribed textual data and comment on their interviews, as well as add to or delete what they felt necessary. The interviews were read and coded by two authors and themes compared.

Results reflected findings of similar studies and opinions of experts in the study abroad field, which seemed to further validate the data. In qualitative research the terms "reliability" and "validity" cannot be applied as such since the aim of qualitative grounded theory research is not to find generalizable results, but rather to acquire an in-depth understanding of a specific sample. Instead, research suggests using concepts such as trustworthiness and rigor. Through prolonged engagement and persistent observation the researcher adds depth to his study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore, credibility of the study was ensured using triangulation and member checks by sharing results with interviewees. Findings were further compared to other sources, such as participant observation, previous research, and literature. Independent reviews of the textual data by two different researchers aimed at ensuring that themes were adequate and trustworthy. Lincoln and Guba (1985) furthermore suggest that external validity as such is not a valid concept in qualitative research, instead

how transferable the findings are to other samples and contexts should be determined by the reader of the study.

RESULTS

As mentioned in the methods section, this study employed a mixed-methods approach. This approach was chosen to get the most reliable data possible. For the pre-study abroad variables, the researchers wanted to access a large enough sample of students to get a valid understanding of the interest in types of programs, content, motivations, and barriers to study abroad. An electronic survey was chosen to have access to a large student population of which only a small percentage would study abroad. In order to be able to gain a more in-depth understanding of a small sample of students and their attitudes and perceived impacts of a previous study abroad experience, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the approach for the post study abroad variables. This section will first discuss the survey results (barriers, motivations, interest in specific programs) and then describe the interview data on impacts.

Survey data were analyzed using a statistical software package (SPSS) and the main findings are summarized here. Almost all students have always lived in the United States (87.7%). Over two-thirds (69.7%) stated that English is the only language spoken in their home. Furthermore, 70% of the respondents own a passport and 82.2% have traveled outside of the United States. Of the students who have traveled outside the United States, 94.7% have either been to Mexico and/or Canada. Russia and the Baltic States were the least traveled area by the students with two percent. While most students have been out of the United States, only 13.0% have actually studied abroad before. Of those who studied abroad before, 84.6% did so during college, while 15.4% did so during high school. Most of the programs were long-term study abroad programs (53.8%), defined as eight or more weeks. Additionally, of the students who studied abroad, most first became interested when a friend encouraged them to study abroad (30%), a professor encouraged them (25%), or they saw brochures, or posters, or signs with study abroad information (25%). The main motivations for these students to study abroad were for adventure (92.3%), because they were curious to see another culture (80.8%), and they thought it would improve their education (73.1%).

Data showed that most students did not report many barriers to study abroad. Lack of interest, being responsible for children or older adults, being afraid to go abroad, food, language and safety were all not important barriers for the students. The main barriers were money (67%), followed by time (wanting to graduate as fast as possible) for 48% of the students.

Overall, the majority of students (72%) expressed a lot of interest in study abroad programs, with 42.5 % being either extremely or very interested in study abroad. Another 30 % stated they were interested in study abroad. Most students preferred a short-term study abroad program (eight weeks or less) with other students and faculty from the same institution (a combined 79.5% were interested, very interested, or extremely interested), followed by a semester abroad with other American students (43% stated they were either extremely or very interested in that option). Students were least interested in a full academic year abroad. Only 18% of students were either extremely or very interested in studying abroad for a full year. When asked how likely they were to study abroad for either a semester, short-term program or academic year, 57% of the students stated they were most likely to enroll in a short-term program with faculty and students from the same institution. The most popular study abroad destinations, as expressed by students in this sample, were Western Europe (65% were extremely or very interested) followed by Central America (46% extremely or very interested). The least popular destinations seemed to be Africa (26%) and Asia (26%). Students were furthermore asked about interest in specific content areas of study abroad programs. The most popular content areas were soft adventure activities (80%), learning about and trying local food (72%), learning about the culture and local customs (69%), learning about the marine environment (68%), natural areas and jungles (65%) and hands on learning and community service (61%).

Upon returning from their study abroad experience, fifteen students were interviewed using in-depth, semi-structured interviews in order to gain a broader understanding of the ways in which their experiences abroad had impacted them. Table 1 summarizes the interview questions, corresponding themes and subthemes.

**INTERVIEW QUESTION ONE:
LEARNING ABOUT BEING AMERICAN/
AMERICAN CULTURE**

Interview responses showed that students reflected on both negative and positive aspects of the American culture based on the contrast with the culture visited. All students noted how America has a lot of excess and abundance. Andy (pseudonym used) for example stated: "Being American, we live in such luxury and abundance of electricity, water, food, and so on." Ten of the fifteen students expressed concern about the consumptiveness/wastefulness of Americans when compared to the way of life in the country visited. For example, Littleton stated that she was surprised that: "We waste a lot of water and electricity. We just have a lot of things that we really don't need that we think we need but we can clearly get by without them if we just took the time to realize it. We don't need phones and iPods and TVs and while those are all great things, we are lucky to have them, but we don't need them." After studying abroad, Valencia thinks that we as Americans are spoiled and "that we consume a lot more than we need to." Horatio agreed with this by stating that we are "very wasteful with our resources." Another theme that evolved is a new reflection of American culture, especially the elements of time pressure and fear. Megan reflected that, "In America, our culture is based on time and consumerism. It is hard to see that when you are

wrapped up in it. Getting out of the country, it was easy to see how we are stuck in schedules and consuming. Our lives are based on schedules, whereas here (in host country) life is based on the things that need to get done not when." Students commented on how fast and sterile American culture seemed when they returned and how lives in countries they went to were based on natural rhythms. People seemed to be less stressed, even though physically they worked harder. Kat gave a good summary of how she felt American culture is fear-based: "I feel that the way I live my life is based on fear. I feel like in some ways we are scared into living a particular way of life. There is so much of my life that is devoted to being protected from any possibility of discomfort or pain, I worry excessively about things I cannot control." She later recounts how stepping out of her comfort zone while traveling abroad helped her overcome some of that fear.

**INTERVIEW QUESTION TWO:
CHANGES OF AWARENESS IN STUDENT**

One of the major themes that demonstrated how students have changed is an increased social awareness. Specifically, Katrina (pseudonym used), a 27-year old graduate Recreation student who went to Central America stated, "I feel like I am more aware of people and my surround-

TABLE 1. Interview Themes

Interview Questions	Themes
As you reflect on your experience, did you learn anything about being American/ the American culture? If so what?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Excess/Abundance 2. Consumptiveness 3. Culture <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3.1 Fear 3.2 Time Pressure
Do you feel like you changed as a result of your study abroad experience? If so how?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Increased social awareness <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1 Respect 1.2 Guilt 2. Leadership 3. Feelings of achievement 4. Self-reflection 5. Self-confidence
Did you learn anything about the culture of the country you visited that you would want to remember?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Perspective change 2. People getting along 3. Using what they have
Have you tried to change anything in your own life based on your travels? If so what?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Critical thinking 2. Small steps to do your part
If a student asked you about study abroad what would you tell them?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It's important 2. Overcoming fears <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2.1 Less afraid 3. Encouraging others

ings and other people's surroundings and where they live and what kind of conditions they live in and what kind of conditions I live in and things that I can change to make the world a better place and just making others aware that there's just really good things about Belize and they just don't have to think it's a third-world country." Students further showed an increase of social awareness by stating that their study abroad experience has led them to respect the other culture and religion. In some cases, this increased awareness led students to feel a sense of guilt, as in the case of Tara Wynn (pseudonym used), a 22-year old senior Recreation student, who stated, "it makes me feel guilty about things that we have and....things we take for granted. Maybe things we shouldn't even have....It makes me question if what we have really makes us happy or not." Besides learning about the country visited and reflecting on one's own and other cultures, students reported that study abroad allowed them to reflect on themselves and their place in the world. Derrick (pseudonym used), a 29-year old graduate Education student supported this by stating "I think that traveling just in general allows you to kind of reflect upon yourself so...I'd say that it helped me find who I am and how to feel more comfortable with myself or those around me."

Other students such as Jeraldo, a 22-year old senior History major who went to Greece, stated that he gained leadership skills and self-confidence because he did "something new, something different, and...something unknown and everyone that did go was stepping out of their comfort zones and being a leader." Mar, a 24-year old senior Recreation student agreed and noted, "[I] definitely felt more confident. I can do more things because I have been abroad." Littleton stated that she left her experience with feelings of achievement. To support this, she stated it is "something to add to...not my resume, but my...list of achievements of things that I've done, and it makes me feel more accomplished and like I've achieved a lot of the things that I want to." The interview results showed that stepping out of the student's comfort zone was a key factor for the students to grow and learn about themselves. Overcoming these uneasy and new situations allowed the students to reflect. Kat gave a good account of how stepping out of her comfort zone during her experience impacted her by stating:

This trip showed me a different way of looking at things. I was put in an environment without a lot of protection and comforts. I was uncomfortable, uneasy, and then I relaxed. I got used

to it. I had to make adjustments within myself to stay open to the experience. I survived discomfort and grew because of it.

The culture shock Kat described enabled her to learn, reflect and grow (Adler, 1985).

INTERVIEW QUESTION THREE: HOST CULTURE

Students also expressed learning a lot about the countries they visited, resulting in a perspective change on each of the respective countries. Michaels stated that his "perspective changed in Turkey because I ran into a lot of friendly people there. Everyone was very welcoming and very nice. And I wasn't scared...when you get out there and understand them, they're really nice, good people." Megan, who traveled to Central America, agreed commenting:

I am more open to the customs of other cultures. Before, I thought they might have more crime; I might get sick or kidnapped all those things that our American culture tells us. I feel like they use this propaganda to keep us in the hotels and tourist attractions run by American companies. I am no longer afraid of experiencing other cultures in depth.

Smith added that "you kind of look at things differently and...you're more respectful about what you have like water, I didn't realize how valuable water is." Valencia further added a personal anecdote about her trip: "It sounds silly and whatnot, but being in the jungle and like holding alligators and tarantulas.... when my girlfriend or somebody freaks out about a spider or something, I'm like 'that's not a spider...you want to know what a spider looks like?' It kind of puts everything in perspective in many ways."

Several of the students commented on how people get along. Valencia said that what stood out was "that there were people from so many different backgrounds and living so close together and...from our experience; they got along really, really well in the areas that we visited." Horatio added that the people of the host country were "very friendly.... they honk at each other to say hi....It's a simpler way of life...That's the whole charm of the country. If it got really industrialized and more built up, it would lose its charm."

Finally, several students noted the fact that locals use "everything they have," referring to the ability to make things work on limited budgets and resources. Horatio noticed that in Belize "they definitely use everything they have." Smith also added the same idea about Tanzania in that "it is

a very, very poor country, but they definitely work with what they have." This idea stands in stark contrast to the consumerist society these students grew up in, enabled a reflection on values, what it means to be happy and goals in life.

INTERVIEW QUESTION FOUR: TRANSFER TO OWN LIFE

When asked if these observations changed their own behaviors upon return from their study abroad experience, several students reported trying to make certain lifestyle changes and noted that it just takes small steps to protect the environment and conserve. For example, returning from a trip that included a homestay with limited electricity and water, Littleton noticed "little things like turning off the lights when leaving the room or turning water off when brushing my teeth. Just making little changes even though it doesn't make a huge difference, in the grand scheme of things, those are all things that we can change." Valencia also noticed that he does not use as much water and is mindful of conserving water. Smith also stated that he is more conscientious with water because he does not "take as long of showers. That was a big change." Finally, Horatio said that "now I turn off all the lights. Before, in the morning when I would get ready, I would turn them all on and leave them on even if I wasn't in the room." She recycles more and is more aware of what she throws away. Several students commented on how they became more interested in different topics to study or different graduate programs, and how they now are more aware of different ways to travel and destinations to go see. The most common theme students reported is trying to remember some of the clarities they felt as a result of their stay in a different culture. Agnes put it this way: "In my life I would like to retain the sense of calm and ability to be present and live in the moment instead of constantly worrying about what I need to do and where I need to be next. I also want to keep in mind what I 'need' versus what I 'want'." Kat added, "I definitely changed. I am more prepared to be active in my life, more open to new ideas. Also, this might be weird, but here I was complaining that I cannot straighten my hair for two weeks and these women spend their whole lives taking care of people. They were naturally beautiful. I am usually overly hard on me in that respect and I realize that now." Traveling as part of a structured short-term study-abroad program allowed these students to take a step away from their lives, comfort zones, and culture and look at themselves and their life. As a result, they gained an

enhanced sense of introspection and clarity about their own lives, which changed them. Andy agreed by stating, "I feel like I have changed. I do not always feel the need to be all made up or dress to impress. Everybody in that country seemed so relaxed, not worried about their looks but rather their families." Jen also commented how she changed on her trip, from the destinations and how she wants to travel, to looking into new graduate school options to wanting to really live abroad for one year. She concluded by stating, "A lot of us felt our lives had turned around for the better, it is nothing you could hope to find in the safety of staying home."

INTERVIEW QUESTION FIVE: PERCEPTIONS ON STUDY ABROAD

All students interviewed recommend studying abroad and said they suggested it to several of their friends. Kat specifically said, "I would completely recommend the experience. In the two weeks I was gone I learned and grew so much." Jas added, "It was the most amazing thing I have ever done. That is what I keep telling everyone about my trip." Jenn stated, "I would tell them to go now before they make any more major life decisions. Studying abroad will change your life forever." Lola stated in summary, "I would 100% recommend it. Studying abroad opens your eyes. It helps you step back from your regular life and gives you a new perspective."

DISCUSSION

It has been argued that study abroad has the potential to allow for contemplation, introspection, a renewed awareness of one's own culture and a new worldview. This study furthermore showed that in order to attract the most students, programs should be short-term (eight weeks or less) with other students and faculty from the same institution. The most popular destination for students in recreation classes were Western Europe followed by Central America. Lack of money and time were the biggest barriers to students' ability to study abroad, while adventure, seeing another culture and improved education were the main motivations. However, students did not view study abroad as only a resume builder, they wanted to experience another culture and learn about the history, food, people, and perhaps most important of all, themselves.

After students return from a study abroad program, they experience an increase in self-confidence and self-esteem. When students go abroad, they

make friendships with fellow students and natives of the country. Stepping out of their comfort zones, they do things they might not normally do in the United States, like trying new foods, activities, and entertainment, thereby gaining self-confidence and a new perspective on the world. These ideas are mirrored by several quantitative studies. For example, Robalik (2006) stated that the three statements students agreed with the most were that studying abroad "contributed to my overall understanding of the country I studied in" (mean = 4.76), that studying abroad "enhanced my independence" (mean = 4.56) and finally that it "increased my open-mindedness" (mean = 4.52).

Over the years, many studies have shown that studying abroad leads to personal growth (Baty & Dold, 1977; Carsello & Greaser, 1976; Farrell & Suvedi, 2003; Kuh & Kauffman, 1985; Nash, 1976; Todd, 2001). Many other studies have also looked at the relationship between personal development through study abroad and gender, previous overseas experience, and duration of the program that this particular study did not examine. Most studies have agreed that study abroad is a positive experience for most students (Farrell & Suvedi, 2003; Kuh & Kauffman, 1985). When looking at the themes that evolved from this study, one can see that most impacts are related to the concept of personal development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

CREATION OF A STUDY ABROAD MODEL

It became apparent during the course of this study that the impacts of study abroad are dependent not only on the motivation to study abroad, how the actual experience is framed and facilitated (i.e. out of comfort zone experiences), but also how the experience is debriefed. The instructor can facilitate student learning through activities like journaling or daily debriefings, enabling the student to reflect. The more drastic the cultural differences are that students experience, the more need for an in depth facilitation on how to deal with reversed culture shock. The following model was created to show the entire process of short-term, faculty-led study abroad programs in hopes that it will help administrators in making decisions, as well as guide future research. It consists of two categories of pre-study abroad issues—the desires to study abroad and the barriers to study abroad. The actual faculty-led, short-term travel study experience follows and is shown in

the center of the model. Finally, and most importantly, this leads to a variety of outcomes including making lifestyle changes, learning about what it means to be an American (for better or for worse), learning more about the country that was visited, and experiencing some kind of change in self-concept. Administrators can market and design study abroad experiences based on adventure, seeing new cultures and enhancing education, all pre-trip attributes shown in the model under motivations. The best ways to market are through word of mouth from previous study abroad participants, professors and promotional flyers or posters. Faculty-led programs, which include elements of cultural immersion, such as homestays or community service, and are designed in a way to put the students slightly out of their comfort zone, are the center of the model (Figure 1). This type of experience, facilitated by a faculty member, leads to the impacts shown in the model. As mentioned before, facilitation of the experience should also include a debriefing of the entire program and how to apply the learned upon return to the home culture.

CONCLUSION

This model is a first attempt to analyze the different factors in the study abroad process from fears and motivations to the actual experience and finally outcomes. Future research could help refine this model. Much research has been done on the actual outcomes; however, more research could be done about the center piece of the model. What attributes of the actual study abroad experience influence how much or what a student retains? Findings from this study, for example, seem to suggest that a "stepping out of comfort zones" was vital to student learning. More research is needed in the area of specific student attributes and how these influence feelings towards study abroad programs and outcomes. As an example, research on gender and study abroad has been inconclusive with one study suggesting gender differences and others not (Baty & Dold, 1977; Farrell & Suvedi, 2003; Dukes et al., 1994). Finally, more research is needed to better understand the pre-trip attributes that either constrain or motivate students to participate. Implications for study-abroad administrators were discussed, and include marketing through professors and word of mouth, offering short-term programs with enough change to allow students to slightly step out of their comfort zone, marketing for adventure and

cultural immersion and lastly debriefing the experience.

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FIGURE 1 . Study Abroad Model

