



[Study Abroad Increases Personal, Professional and Academic Development]

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Introduction

Study abroad programs strive to help students amplify their intercultural competency and personal growth in many different ways. Study abroad programs at universities and colleges offer unique experiences to students by providing life-long personal and professional benefits such as personal growth, cultural awareness, employability, new language skills, creativity, communication skills, social network development and other benefits (Curtis & Ledgerwood, 2018). During these programs, students are given transformative opportunities to reach their academic goals.

A study done by Haas, (2018) found that quantitative and qualitative research indicates that studying abroad improves learning as related to ancillary types of learning outcomes, such as with cultural awareness. The evaluation of the study proved that current study abroad programs are valued and seen as a positive experience. Students who explore these experiences help contribute to their educational journey and better prepare themselves for an intercultural world. However, there are some barriers students face while deciding to study abroad, specifically financial constraints. Study abroad programs provide students with opportunities to grow personally, academically and culturally and the students who take advantage of the programs are able to enhance all of these aspects.

How Studying Abroad Enhances Personal Growth, Intercultural Competence and Increases Cultural Adaptation

When students are interested in expanding their skills and immersing themselves into a new culture, they can take the opportunity to study abroad and enhance personal growth. Today's interrelated and interconnected world demands that college students develop the intercultural competence to meet the challenges of the 21st century (Maharaja, 2018). Being away from family and friends pushes people to become independent. Students will learn how to manage finances and make complicated decisions on their own. Study abroad programs aim to provide students with new learning experiences and personal development opportunities. In the study done by Maharaja, (2018) she found that students reflected on their participation in study abroad programs and gained a better understanding of their own culture and new cultures, increased their level of self-confidence and became more self-aware. Adapting to a new environment requires one to become self-sufficient. Problem-solving skills can only be enhanced as students will find themselves in situations they have never faced before.

Living in a different country for a long or short period causes students to become more culturally aware. In a study conducted by Borzikowsky & Wolff, (2018) the researchers aimed to test whether educational stays abroad of three-month duration have a positive impact on the development of intercultural competence. The study found that there is a positive impact of international experiences on intercultural competence. Students are introduced to new traditions and perspectives which deepen one's understanding of the world and allows students to gain more appreciation for diverse cultures. Students who find themselves fully immersed in the new culture allows them to gain knowledge and experiences that they cannot gain elsewhere. The exposure to diverse cultures helps students appreciate different viewpoints and allows for critical self-reflection. Living in a new country prompts students to reflect on their own cultural assumptions and biases.

Studying Abroad Financial Constraints on Undergraduate Students

Study abroad programs have many benefits to students' professional and personal development but there always are some downsides to opportunities like this. Some students have dreams of studying abroad but their dreams quickly fade when they discover how much of a financial burden it is going to be. The biggest barrier for students wanting to study abroad is the financial cost. A study done by Curtis & Ledgerwood, (2018) adopted a survey instrument from the American Council on Education. "This organization provides guidance and leadership to approximately 1,800 degree-granting US colleges and institutions and promotes collaboration and partnerships to help universities address challenges in the areas of diversity, equity and lifelong learning" (Curtis & Ledgerwood, 2018).

The study shows that there are students who are interested in studying abroad but do not think it is possible because of financial constraints; 46 percent of respondents in Florida and 42 percent in Arizona indicated that they were interested but do not know if it will be possible for them to participate in study abroad programs (Curtis & Ledgerwood, 2018).

Universities need to recognize that the main reason students do not enroll in study abroad programs are due to the cost; 73 percent of students in Florida and 85 percent of students in Arizona indicated that their constraint was a result of the cost (Curtis & Ledgerwood, 2018).

How Studying Abroad Aligns with Personal Academic Goals and Leads to Higher Graduate Employability

A big thing for students to consider while studying abroad is how the program is going to align with their overall academic goals. Exposure to different cultures' education systems has the potential to help grow one's academic perspective. Many study abroad programs offer different courses based on students' majors and minors. The knowledge students gain while abroad will have a big effect on their future after graduation. In a study conducted by Potts, (2018) the researcher surveyed over 4,000 students who had participated in studying abroad over an 18-year period from 1999-2017. More than half of the respondents agreed that their learning abroad experience contributed to a job offer at some point in their employment history (Potts, 2018). The results from U.S. participants in the study showed that longer programs abroad had a statistically significant, positive impact on the development of 11 out of 15 employability skills tested (Potts, 2018). These findings suggest that different types of study abroad programs lead to different employability outcomes and should therefore be offered and undertaken in a deliberate manner to align with the student's intended employment outcome (Potts, 2018).

Conclusion

To better prepare students for a globalized world, study abroad programs are one of the best ways to get immersed in a new culture, gain new understandings and grow academically. Studying abroad offers benefits that extend far beyond the classroom that significantly impact students' personal and professional development. The exposure to different cultures' perspectives prepares students for a competitive job market. Despite the advantages, financial constraints remain a notable barrier that limits students' access to these opportunities. Universities and institutions can maximize the impact of study abroad opportunities and better prepare students for life after graduation.

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