

The Effects of Study Abroad

What Student Records Can Tell Us and What They Can't

By Benjamin F. Hadis

Among the benefits study abroad professionals expect college students to get from a study abroad experience are an enhanced understanding of other peoples and their cultures, a growth of cosmopolitanism and lessening of parochialism, and more focus on the meaning of one's college education.

Whereas it is next to impossible to measure the first two types of alleged benefits by looking at grade records, these benefits can be traced by means of behavioral research. Cosmopolitanism as a result of studying abroad has been the focus of survey research (Sharma and Mulka, 1993; Thomlison, 1991). This type of data can also be used to look at the impact of study abroad on personal growth (Kauffmann, et al., 1992). Students' records might prove useful in gauging how important studying abroad is in giving greater meaning to their education.

Following upon the recent stream of articles on the subject in *Transitions Abroad*, this article is the first step toward the design of a study to empirically evaluate the impact of studying abroad on students' overall college achievement.

Since individuals change substantially during their college years, we need to make sure that the growth we notice is not simply the result of chronological maturation. To be sure that study abroad students mature more than their counterparts we need pre- and post-tests for the experimental group (students who studied abroad) and a control group (students who did not).

Methodological Issues

The measurement of maturation as a reflection of the student's increased focus on the meaning of college education is

not an easy task. Will such a focus be translated into a higher grade-point average? If so, we could rely on "objective" grade records kept by registrars. What do students mean, upon returning from a semester or year abroad, by saying that they have gathered a new understanding of their college education and have changed entirely?

One possible change is that U.S. students have adapted to academic environments where grade competitiveness is toned down—to the point that they have lost grade anxiety. Academic environments abroad may have led our students to look at the grades they received mainly as an indication of their performance rather than as a goal in itself. The vast majority of U.S. students who study abroad cannot transfer grades obtained abroad to their home campus grade point average; this may be one of the factors that contribute to an average of half of a point drop in the grade performance of U.S. students studying abroad.

If U.S. students adapt to academic environments abroad, where grades do not elicit as much anxiety as on U.S. campuses, how will these students perform when they return to their home campus? Will they lose their competitiveness and grade anxiety? Will they stop cramming for home campus examinations and study for the sheer pleasure of satisfying their desire for knowledge?

The fundamental question is whether awareness about the intrinsic value of education and the concomitant suspension of grade anxiety—if it occurs—will prevail when the U.S. student returns and those favorable conditions vanish.

Chances are that students vary widely in the ways they respond to their academic environments abroad. Some will reenter their home campus and regain their competitiveness and grade anxiety. Others will retain their search for knowledge like the friends they made abroad.

Just as there are wide differences among students, there are also differences among programs. This may account for the way students will be conditioned to perform upon their return. Students who participate in programs where the number of U.S. students is not large will probably be less likely to revert to the grade anxiety pattern when they reenter the home campus.

Those who attend a study abroad program where they are the only Americans and where English is not the language of instruction are apt to be quite different from those who choose an American "island" program in England. We expect the former may be more open to change—and perhaps more mature. The contextual factors of the study abroad program and students' predisposition to adopt the academic pathos they have perceived abroad may interact in deter-

References

Students Abroad: Strangers at Home by Norma L. Kaufman, et. al. (Education for a Global Society, 1992).

The Impact of International Education upon United States Students in Comparative Perspective by Hadhav P. Sharma and John S. Mulka (ERIC, No. ED358800, 1993).

Effects of a Study-Abroad Program on University Students: Toward a Predictive Theory of Inter-cultural Contact by T. Dean Thomlison (ERIC, No. 332629, 1991).

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mining the levels of grade anxiety that they experience after returning to the U.S.

Another situation where personal and contextual factors are involved is that of students who, although cosmopolitan, must choose a program on academic grounds. For example, a drama student who attends a drama program in an English-speaking country—where the number of fellow Americans is largest—may associate more with students who share drama interests than with students from the U.S. Such contextual factors are hard to measure.

If we rely on grade records to measure the benefits of studying abroad, are students who become—and remain—substantially less grade anxious likely to change their home college grades? If they experience a grade point average change, will it go up or down? Does a lessening of grade anxiety bring grade performance down as well? Or does awareness of the intrinsic value of education make students more interested in the learning process, which in turn brings their grades up even if grade maximization is not the main reason to study?

Findings and Discussion

I recorded the grade point averages of Montclair State Univ. graduates who studied abroad during the academic years 1994-1995 and 1995-1996 prior to studying abroad and upon graduation. I then compared these records to those of Montclair graduates who did not study abroad.

Grade improvement appears to be greater among the graduates who studied abroad. Their average gpa increase amounted to 8.81 percent of the difference between the 4.0 ceiling and their gpa before studying abroad. Their counterparts who did not study abroad im-

proved their gpa just 1.07 percent. Whereas there is no statistical significance in the difference between the two groups, only the control group (those who did not study abroad) were randomly sampled. The experimental group is the universe of those who studied abroad and graduated during the last two years from Montclair State Univ.

The findings show, as expected, that students who study abroad are not typical among U.S. undergraduates. Their grade point average at the midpoint of their college education is better than their counterparts who did not study abroad, and their cumulative average upon graduation is substantially better than that of the students who did not study abroad.

Whether grade improvement reflects maturation is debatable. The results in this area are mixed and in many ways related to the programs students have attended. Whereas U.S. students who studied in Britain have, as expected, improved their grade point more than the average study abroad student did (14.1 percent compared to the average 8.8 percent of the improvable range before reaching the 4.0 ceiling), students who studied in Ireland, Spain, Mexico, and Australia have retained practically the same gpa they had prior to studying abroad. Students who went to France experienced a decline in their gpa.

The methodological conclusion we can arrive at is that the improvement of a study abroad student's grade point average is not a valid indicator of the maturation impact that is attributable to studying abroad. Because of the variance encountered from country to country and from program to program, we should conclude that program characteristics and students' predispositions interact in such ways that gpa improvements (or declines) have different meanings in different contexts. In summary, students' records are helpful to gauge the differences between students who study abroad and those who do not. However, these grade records are not helpful in gauging the impact of studying abroad on the students' maturation process. ■

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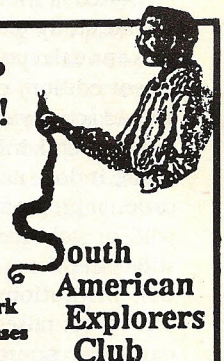
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