Why are They Better Students when They Come Back? Determinants of Academic Focusing Gains in the Study Abroad Experience

Benjamin F. Hadis
Montclair State University

Introduction

International educators in general, and study abroad advisors in particular, have recognized for many years that United States college students returning from studying abroad show positive changes. According to their impressionistic perceptions, international educators often identify improvements in terms of concern about international affairs, appreciation of different cultures, maturation, self-awareness and independence.

Much of the research literature on the impact of study abroad on US college students coincides with those impressionistic perceptions and finds that participants in study abroad programs acquire global-mindedness, grow intellectually, and develop personally (Bates 1997; Carlson & Widaman 1988; Cash 1993; Drews & Meyer 1996; Hutchins 1996; King & Young 1994; McCabe 1994; Thomlison 1991; Waldbaum 1996; Ybarra 1997). When researchers find no evidence of gains on the part of study abroad students, they acknowledge that their samples are too small to detect statistical significance (Zhai 2000).

Research has also identified various kinds of second language acquisition gains — especially in listening and comprehension abilities— for students who study abroad in non-English speaking countries (Austin 1989; Brecht, et al 1993; Brecht & Robinson 1993; Ginsberg 1992; Ginsberg, et al. 1992; Iino 1996; Jones &Bond 2000; Kline 1993 and 1998; Parr 1988; Rivers 1998). With few exceptions (e.g., Opper, Teichler & Carlson 1990), academic impacts other than linguistic ones have not been dealt with extensively in the research literature on gains from studying abroad.

Many faculty and study abroad advisors who chat with their students returning from study abroad experiences will recognize that one of the most noticeable changes in these students is a higher than average curiosity and interest in academic matters. As they become more interested in academic

issues, participants are less often distracted by non-academic, age-related stimuli. Some educators refer to this process as a sign of maturation, and rightly so. The issue, though, is to find out whether (and how) studying abroad contributes to this process of academically-oriented maturation. Our survey of New Jersey college students who studied abroad between Fall 1997 and Summer 2002 gauges the academic impacts of studying abroad. It does so on the basis of the respondents' reporting whether they are more focused on their studies as a result of studying abroad as well as whether, upon returning from studying abroad, they found themselves studying more for the sheer pleasure of learning than for getting a high grade.

The purpose of this article is to explore the cluster of experiences that participants in study abroad go through — both during their sojourn abroad and immediately upon return — and how these experiences enhance shifts in their individual priorities. I will discuss to what extent, and why, some study abroad participants bring their academic endeavors to the forefront of their interests when they return to their home colleges. Since the experiences of study abroad program participants are many, eye opening, and quite complex, this article will also explore the intricate and multiple determinations of the changes in the participants. With the help of multiple regression and path analyses I will lay out a model that charts those changes, their consequences, and mutual determinations.

Methodology

Students who applied to study abroad through the New Jersey State Consortium for International Studies between Fall 1997 and Summer 2002 were asked to reply to an online questionnaire about studying abroad. About 200 students from The College of New Jersey and 36 students from Rowan University were contacted by e-mail for this purpose. In addition, 536 randomly-selected study abroad applicants were contacted by regular mail and asked to find the questionnaire online. A total of 53 letters came back as non-deliverable, and several questionnaires were discarded because they were erroneously filled out by students who were either currently studying abroad or who never did. In total, 95 usable questionnaires were completed online. The return rate of the online survey was thus just under 14%. Due to budgetary restrictions, there was no follow-up mailing. In order to avoid adding a possible bias, there was no follow-up e-mailing.

We had intended to contrast students who studied abroad with a control group of college students who did not study abroad. The control group would

be drawn from the same pool of study abroad applicants who applied to study abroad, but consist of those who withdrew before departure. Because of the assumed selectivity of students who apply to study abroad, our intention was to match program participants with non-participants in terms of their having gone through the application process — and thus, presumably, in terms of their assumed interest in traveling abroad. Unfortunately, only three respondents withdrew, not enough to be considered a control group. The methodological consequence of not having a control group is that any changes that our questionnaire gauges between the time of application to study abroad and the present time cannot be conclusively related to having studied abroad alone. Changes may also be due to a process of maturation among this college population and, thus, the effect of study abroad could be confused with the effect of maturation. I report elsewhere on the effects of studying abroad, as well as the methodological solution I used to rule out the possible effect of maturation (Hadis 2005).

The present analysis deals with the determinants of academic focusing among participants in study abroad programs — and not merely whether studying abroad enhances academic focusing. The units of analysis are, therefore, study abroad program participants.

Objective indicators of gains in academic achievement, such as a grade point average increase, present both methodological and substantive problems in the context of study abroad that make them, paradoxically, less valid and reliable than the subjective reporting by participants. The main methodological issue is that because of self-selectivity in the application process to study abroad, and because of the eligibility criteria for studying abroad set by program administrators, participants start off with relatively high grade point averages prior to their application to participate. Therefore, there will be a low ceiling for grade improvement and it will be difficult to detect increases that are statistically significant. Substantively, a student can conceivably become a better student and, at the same time scorn the instrumental pursuit of a high grade point average as an enhancement of their (future) competitiveness. Furthermore, the exposure to grading in a higher education system that has not gone through the process of grade inflation — e.g., the British higher education system, where professors seldom grade exceptional examinations or papers with a mark higher than 70% — will change the priorities of United States participants. One possible consequence of this shift of priorities is that a participant's grade point average can come slightly down, not because they have become worse students after studying abroad, but because they are less obsessed with their grades (Hadis 2005).

Theoretical Formulations

This study measured several variables: the intrinsic value of education, global-mindedness, reverse culture shock, independence and international mobility. These were used as independent variables in relation to the dependent variable of academic focusing. The interrelationship of these variables, discussed below, reveals their significance as determinants of gain in post-study abroad academic focusing.

One of the consequences of studying abroad is the realization that learning has its intrinsic value, which lessens the importance of the instrumentality of grades. This discovery will also drive US students to focus more on their studies. Insofar as this discovery is also related to personal growth, as attested by acquiring independence and developing a sense of global-mindedness, these two factors will also have direct impact on the study abroad returnees' discovery of their interest in learning and their focusing on their studies.

Study abroad program participants gain global-mindedness insofar as they successfully overcome culture shock through the acquisition of open-mindedness. Those program participants who gain a sense of responsible independence abroad will also be more prone to nurture the global-mindedness that their experience abroad has fostered. On the other hand, a disposition to international mobility (or a resistance to it) will enhance (or lessen) global-mindedness.

Although the majority of study abroad returnees experiences reverse culture shock, it is clearly not something that all go through. Yet it is an important experience that helps to consolidate the discoveries about both oneself and the world that studying abroad has unleashed. Experiencing reverse culture shock will thus be directly determined by a gained sense of independence, and inversely determined by one's resistance to live anywhere else but in the United States.

The experience of reverse culture shock will also enhance valuing education intrinsically. The latter will also result from open-mindedness as well as from focusing on one's studies. Since focusing on one's studies should also be a function of valuing education intrinsically, it is possible to conceive of these two factors as maintaining a positive feedback relation.

Academic Focusing

Exposed to multiple stimuli — work, friends, courtship, sports, entertainment — and free from the regimented environment of the K-12 educational system, traditional college age students tend to set a low priority on studying for the sake of expanding their knowledge. When they prepared for their study abroad

experience, I recurrently heard my advisees refer to their impending experience as "the trip," as if their image of what was to come had more to do with tourism than with the influential, affective experience of taking distance from one's home society — let alone their cognitive expansion and the exposure to a different academic setting that studying abroad entails. Academic focusing, in this context, involves setting a high priority on learning for the sake of expanding knowledge and cognitive skills. We have gauged academic focusing with the degree of agreement with the statement "When I came back to my home college after studying abroad, I was more focused on my studies." Expecting that studying abroad did wonders with every college student in this regard would be too much to ask: respondents "in agreement" or "very much in agreement" with this statement amount to less than half of our sample (48.9%). Using academic focusing as our dependent variable, we will identify the factors that help to explain it.

Global-Mindedness

Despite the selectivity of the student population who is interested in studying abroad — not only in terms of grades but also in terms of interest in knowing the world — the prevailing college student culture tends to be indifferent to the international scene, geographically illiterate, and ignorant about world affairs. Thus, there is room for improvement in terms of the international orientation, even among those who are to embark on a study abroad program. And indeed they do improve: on a scale of one (low) through five (high), respondents to our questionnaire registered a mean of 3.74 when asked about their degree of interest in international news before studying abroad. The mean jumped to 4.22 when respondents were asked about their interest in international news at the present time. Global mindedness entails a concern for issues and processes that affect the world, as well as awareness that local issues are connected to global ones. We will consider the participants' agreement with the statement "The experience of studying abroad has deepened my interest in world affairs" as an indicator of global-mindedness. An overwhelming majority of the respondents express that they have indeed deepened their interest in world affairs: 90.3% are "in agreement" or "very much in agreement" with this statement.

Open-Mindedness

It is commonly accepted among international educators that the wrenching experience of culture shock among those studying abroad is a preamble to an ability to take distance from both one's home- and one's host-society. In

this sense, a positive resolution of culture shock is to open one's mind to new situations and ideas — or, what is the same, the adoption of cultural relativism. Hopefully, this open-mindedness will be acquired on a permanent basis by the person experiencing it, who will transfer it to, and adopt it in the home society upon return. We will measure open-mindedness by the level of agreement with the statement "The experience of studying abroad has made me more open to new ideas." More than 56% of the respondents expressed to be "very much in agreement" and 34% were "in agreement" with this statement (90% combined).

Reverse Culture Shock

The very process that leads to developing an open mind abroad collides with the truisms one has left behind in one's home society. When students return from studying abroad, they will face such truisms as manifested even by close friends. In this sense, experiencing a reverse culture shock entails discarding all preconceptions about the world, truisms about one's home culture and society, and languishing for the active experience abroad one has just come back from. Respondents to our survey were asked to express their level of agreement with the sentence "When returning from studying abroad, I experienced REVERSE culture shock in the United States." A clear majority was "in agreement" or "very much in agreement" with this statement — 62.8%.

Independence

A trait of maturity, independence entails not merely to do as one pleases, but to take responsibility for one's actions rather than relying on other adults to make decisions for oneself. Away from direct family contact — despite the ease of telephone and e-mail communication — a sojourn abroad within the structured context of a study abroad program is a ground conducive to taking responsibility for making one's own decisions — and to learn, with pleasure, that one can indeed do so. The statement "The experience of studying abroad has taught me how to make my own decisions" elicited 79.6% of agreement or "very much" agreement.

Intrinsic Value of Education

Education can be considered a goal in itself, or a means to something else. When it is valued as a goal in itself, education is treasured — intrinsically— for the knowledge and skills it bestows. In the instrumental context of formal rationality, acquiring knowledge becomes secondary to acquiring

credentials. Once a society crystallizes as a credential society, credential qualifiers — grades — tend to be pursued with more emphasis than the expansion of one's knowledge and skills. To acquire the intrinsic value of education involves recapturing the pleasure for knowledge for its own sake. Our questionnaire presented respondents with the statement "After I returned from studying abroad, I found myself studying more for the 'pleasure of knowing' than to get a good grade." A majority of respondents (53.2%) expressed agreement or "very much" agreement with this statement (28.9% declared themselves "neutral"; 18.1% were "in disagreement" or "very much in disagreement.").

International Mobility

Having sojourned abroad can be regarded as a one-time experience that also predisposes one or multiple short-term trips abroad in the future. About one third (34.4%) of our respondents have returned to their study abroad host country for a visit. The independence and open-mindedness that students studying abroad acquire, though, does not mean that they will consider trading their lives in the United States for living abroad. To measure the disposition to international mobility, we asked the respondents to express their agreement with the statement "Now I am convinced that I want to live in the United States for the rest of my life." Sixteen percent are "in agreement" or "very much in agreement" with this statement. Those rejecting the statement ("in disagreement" or "very much in disagreement") amount to 49.4%. The latter will be considered as being in disposition for international mobility. We will consider the former as having reservations toward international mobility.

Findings

The multiple regression of enhanced academic focusing on the intrinsic value of education, independence, and global-mindedness shows a multiple correlation of R=.588 — approximately 35% of the variance of academic focusing is jointly explained by the independent variables. The analysis of variance for this model shows a statistical significance at the .001 level. Among the three independent variables, the development of an intrinsic value of education is the strongest independent variable (β=.322, statistically significant at the .01 level), followed by global-mindedness (β=.241, statistically significant at the .05 level), and independence (β=.217, significant at the .05 level).

Also highly significant (at the .001 level), the multiple correlation of the regression of global-mindedness on international mobility, independence,

Table 1: Regression of Academic Focusing on Intrinsic Value of Education, Independence, and Global Mindedness

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std Error of the Estimate
1	.588†	.346	.324	.88

†Predictors: (Constant) Studying for pleasure more than grade, learned to make own decisions, deepened interest in world affairs

Coefficients‡

Model	B*	Std Error*	Beta**	t	Sig.
1 (Constant)	.907	.277		3.274	.002.
Studying for pleasure more than grade	.320	.090	.322	3.536	.001
Learned to make own decisions	.240	.110	.217	2.182	.032
Deepened interest in world affairs	.317	.132	.241	2.401	.018

‡Dependent variable: more focused on studies

*Unstandardized coefficient

**Standardized coefficient

and open-mindedness is quite high: R=.767, thus explaining almost 59% of the variance of global-mindedness. Open mindedness is, by far, the strongest explanatory factor in this regression equation (β=.553, statistically significant at the .001 level), followed by independence (β=.245, significant at the .01 level), and resistance to geographic mobility (β= -.186, significant at the .05 level).

Taken together, a sense of gained independence and a resistance to international mobility explain less than 15% of the variance of experiencing reverse culture shock (R= .386). Still, the analysis of variance for this regression equation shows statistical significance at the .01 level. Both independent variables present regression coefficients that are significant at the .01 level. The strongest predictor is a gained sense of independence (β = .305). The standardized regression coefficient for resistance to international mobility is β= -.264.

About 33% of the variance of intrinsic value of education is explained by its multiple regression on reverse culture shock, open-mindedness, and academic focusing (R= .575). This regression model is statistically significant at the .001 level. The explanatory strengths of academic focusing

Table 2: Regression of Global-Mindedness on International Mobility, Independence, and Open-Mindedness

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std Error of the Estimate
1	.767†	.588	.574	.53

†Predictors: (constant) More open to new ideas, wants to live in the US forever, learned to make own decisions.

Coefficients‡

Model	B*	Std Error*	Beta**	t	Sig.
1 (Constant)	.940	.268		3.504	.001
Wants to live in the US forever	-.152	.061	-.186	-2.473	.015
Learned to make own decisions	.206	.068	.245	3.047	.003
More open to new ideas	.564	.087	. 553	6.505	.000

‡Dependent variable: experienced reverse culture shock
*Unstandardized coefficient
**Standardized coefficient

Table 3: Regression of Reverse Culture Shock on International Mobility and Independence

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std Error of the Estimate
1	.386†	.149	.130	1.16

†Predictors: (constant) More open to new ideas, wants to live in the US forever, learned to make own decisions.

Coefficients‡

Model	B*	Std Error*	Beta**	t	Sig.
1 (Constant)	2.719	.472		5.761	.000
Wants to live in the US forever	-.326	.121	-.264	-2.700	.008
Learned to make own decisions	.391	.125	.305	3.127	.002

‡Dependent variable: experienced reverse culture shock
*Unstandardized coefficient
**Standardized coefficient

Table 4: Regression of Intrinsic Value of Education on Reverse Culture Shock, Open-Mindedness, and Academic Focusing

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std Error of the Estimate
1	.575†	.331	.309	.89

†Predictors: (constant) More open to new ideas, more focused on studies, experienced reverse culture shock.

Coefficients‡

Model	B*	Std Error*	Beta**	t	Sig.
1 (Constant)	.706	.285		2.474	.015
Experienced reverse culture shock	.197	.078	.228	2.512	.014
More open to new ideas	.364	.133	.270	2.737	.007
More focused on studies	.272	.100	.271	2.737	.007

‡Dependent variable: experienced reverse culture shock

*Unstandardized coefficient

**Standardized coefficient

(β= .271) and open-mindedness (β= .270) are almost identical (both regression coefficients are significant at the .01 level). Having experienced reverse culture shock is not too far behind, β=.228 (significant at the .05 level).

These findings are summarized in Figure 1, which charts all the regression models simultaneously, allowing us to appreciate the direct as well as indirect paths determining the various dependent variables, to examine the leading independent variables in the model, and to understand what it is in the experience of studying abroad that enhances academic focusing gains in its participants.

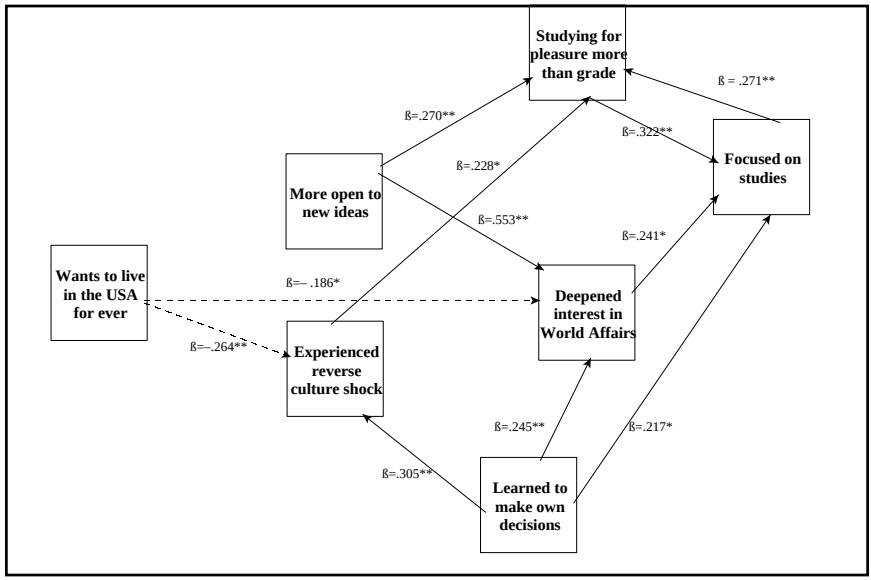
Discussion and Conclusions

We can recognize two key independent variables in this model: independence and open-mindedness. I assume that both these attributes are triggered by the experience of studying abroad. Although we have no data to compare either the degree of open-mindedness or the level of decision making independence before and after participating in a study abroad program, I accept the respondents' claims that they both learned to make their own decisions

and became more open to new ideas as a result of their having studied abroad. Decision making independence has a direct effect on academic focusing (β=.217). It also has two additional indirect paths: the first one mediated through global-mindedness (β=.245 + β=.241); the second one mediated through reverse culture shock and intrinsic value of education (β=.305 + β=.228 + β=.322). The effects of both indirect paths are lessened when a study abroad program participant returns to the United States with a determination to live in their country for good. Thus, the higher the independence to make one's own decisions as a result of having studied abroad, the higher one's academic focusing. The higher the independence, the higher one's global-mindedness; and the higher the global-mindedness, then the higher the academic focusing will be. Finally, the higher the independence, the higher the likelihood of experiencing reverse culture shock; the stronger the culture shock, the higher the intrinsic valuing of education; and the higher the intrinsic valuing of education, the higher the academic focusing.

The counterpart of the determination to live in the United States for the rest of their lives — a disposition to international mobility— can also be considered as an independent variable. In this sense, although international mobility registers no direct effect on academic focusing, it shows two indirect

Figure 1: Path analysis: determinants of academic focusing among study abroad participants (Statistical significance: * .05 level; ** .01 level; *** .001 level).



paths leading to this dependent variable: one is mediated through global-mindedness (β=.186 + β=.241); the other path is mediated through reverse culture shock and intrinsic value of education (β=.264 + β=.228 + β=.322). Thus, the higher the disposition to worldwide international mobility, the higher the global-mindedness will be; and the higher the global-mindedness, the higher the academic focusing will be. At the same time, the higher the disposition to international mobility, the stronger the effect of reverse culture shock; the stronger the reverse culture shock, the higher the valuing education intrinsically; and the higher the intrinsic value of education, the higher the academic focusing.

Open-mindedness has no direct effect on academic focusing. Yet it registers two indirect paths: the first one is mediated through global-mindedness (β=.553 + β=.241); and the second path is mediated through valuing education intrinsically (β=.270 + β=.322). In this sense, the higher the open-mindedness, the higher the global-mindedness; and the higher the global-mindedness, the higher the academic focusing will be. At the same time, the higher the open-mindedness, the higher the intrinsic value of education; and the higher the intrinsic valuing of education, the higher the academic focusing.

To contribute to an academic focusing as a result of having studied abroad higher than the 49% gain manifested by our respondents, it is advisable to concentrate on enhancing both the open-mindedness and the sense of independence of study abroad program participants. Indeed, their gained open-mindedness is already quite widespread (90%), as is independence, at just under 80%.

Study abroad programs can enhance open-mindedness by means of required courses on the host-society's culture. These courses should emphasize the role played by cultural practices of the host-society in reference to its social needs and institutions, in historical context.

There are many ways in which decision-making independence can be enhanced, and there are also quite a few ways that it can be thwarted. In principle, program activities should always leave room for participants to assume responsibility and to make decisions; activities should not be over-structured in a way that turns participants into passive recipients of pre-digested solutions. Whenever feasible, students should be exposed to their host-country counterparts, who, presumably, are more accustomed to fending for themselves. This exposure to host-society students and other international students will also have the desired effect of enhancing open-mindedness. In the event that an island program format is unavoidable, it should be shaped in such a way that contacts with native students come easy, and designed with a concerted effort to avoid the prepackaging of program elements.

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