

RESEARCH NOTE

WHY DO STUDENTS STUDY ABROAD? EXPLORING MOTIVATIONS BEYOND EARNING ACADEMIC CREDITS

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The purpose of this study was to examine motivations of college students' participation in study abroad programs. The study is based on surveys conducted with a group of university students who participated in a study abroad program to either the South Pacific (Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji) or Europe (Austria and the Netherlands). The study results suggested four motivation domains: international travel, escape, social, and academic. Of the four motivational dimensions, the strongest was international travel, followed by academic, social, and escape. The implications of the findings to the student travel industry and study abroad programs are discussed.

Key words: Motivation; Study abroad; Students travel; Education

Introduction

Today's rapidly shrinking and borderless world has created a stronger need for universities and other educational institutions to offer curricula that prepare students to function and have the relevant skills needed for the rapidly changing world. One way to do so is to encourage students to participate in study abroad programs in which they can earn credit toward their degrees. Study abroad programs, from their inception, were meant to offer many benefits to students including international understanding and world-mindedness, maturity, adaptability, career competitiveness, and cultural sensitivity (Coelho, 1962; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1958; Leonard, 1964; Meras, 1932).

College students have the opportunity to explore the world and gain some travel experience while earning credits toward their degree. Most universities now offer various study abroad programs and provide students with a range of countries to choose from. University students, particularly the study abroad students market, are a growing and unique segment of tourists. This study provides insight to the distinctive travel motivations that these study abroad tourists have.

Study Abroad Motivations

The promotion of international understanding or world-mindedness has long been a key goal of study abroad programs, but there is difficulty in

finding actual empirical support for this goal (Hensley & Sell, 1979). Educational goals, such as becoming proficient in a foreign language, experiencing a different teaching method, enhancing career opportunities and competitiveness, and learning about a topic not offered at a home institution, play a large part in the promotion of study abroad programs to potential students (Teichler & Steube, 1991). An immersion into a foreign environment and language during a study abroad program promotes greater independence, even in the most organized programs, which was confirmed by a study conducted by Nash (1976).

While there is a great deal of literature dedicated to the goals of universities, educators, and administrators in the development of study abroad programs, there is limited literature examining the motivations for students to participate in study abroad programs. Wiers-Jenssen (2003) conducted a study of Norwegian students who participated in study abroad and established three motivation indices for study abroad participation. In another study Kitsantas (2004) found three motivational factors for students to study abroad. He named these “cross-cultural competence,” “subject interest and competence,” and “social gathering.” Kitsantas (2004) and Wiers-Jenssen (2003) addressed study abroad motivations that were focused on cross-cultural experience, academics, future careers, and family heritage. Jarvis and Peel (2008) concluded that the major reasons for participating in a short-term study abroad program were broadening awareness of the world, experiencing another culture, meeting people, breaking away from everyday life, and hearing a lot of positive things about studying abroad from friends.

Among various study abroad programs offered in the US, students tend to prefer some geographical regions more than others. In the 2006–2007 academic year, 57% students chose to go to Europe, 15% to Latin America, 10% to Asia, about 6% to Oceania, and 4% to Africa (NAFSA, 2008). Previous studies have indicated that tourist motivations are influential factors in the destination selection process (Phillips & Jang, 2008).

Methods

A group of 136 undergraduate students at an American university, who participated in a 5-

week-long summer study abroad program to the Pacific (Australia, Fiji, and New Zealand) or to Europe (Austria and the Netherlands), were selected for the study. The program was an elective and students were not required to sign up for the program in order to graduate. Data collection involved survey prior to their departure for the study abroad program. The students were asked about their previous travel experience, social ties, motivations, and attitudes towards the various destinations. With reference to timing, program participants were surveyed prior to the start of the orientation meetings, which were held a few days prior to the departure. Questionnaires were distributed to every student who attended the orientation. A total of 12 students (8.1%) either missed the orientation or were late to fill out the survey. Of the total sample, there were more female students (73%) than male (27%). This is because, overall, there are more female study abroad students in each study abroad program offered by the university where the study was conducted. About 90% of the students were either juniors (45%) or seniors (44%), and the rest were sophomores (9%) and freshmen (2%).

To measure study abroad motivations, 35 motivation questions were generated from the previous studies with some modifications so that these items could be applied to the study abroad context (Carlson, Burn, Useem, & Yachimowicz, 1992; Ryan & Glendon, 1998; Sanchez, Fornerino, & Zhang, 2006). After a series of discussions with experts who run study abroad programs to these destinations, 12 items were discarded. The remaining 23 items were pretested with a group of five undergraduate students who have participated in previous study abroad programs. Some of these items were reworded after the pretest. Respondents were asked to rate each motivation item on a 5 point scale (1 = not important at all to 5 = extremely important).

Data Analysis and Results

The descriptive statistics show that 93% of the students had previously traveled outside the US at least once. The majority (60%) of those who had traveled outside the country had visited up to five countries, mostly Canada, Mexico, and those in

the Caribbean. Among the two regions (Europe and the South Pacific), the majority (75%) of the sample intend to visit the South Pacific.

Principle component factor analysis with Varimax rotation of 23 motivation items resulted in four motivation factors. These factors include 1) international travel with nine items, 2) escape with six items, 3) academic with four items, and 4) social with three items (Table 1). Only those items that have factor loading of 0.4 or above were included in the factor. One of the items, "develop close relationship with locals," was not included in any factor because the item was double loaded (0.4 or above) on two factors (Thurstone, 1947). Although the study has a sample size of 136, it is large enough to conduct a 23-item factor analysis based on a 5:1 subject-to-variable ratio, which means that the sample should be five times of the number of variables (Hatcher, 1994), and it should

have more than the minimum of 100 subjects (Kline, 1979). Each of the four motivation dimensions had an acceptable reliability alpha score ranging from 0.75 to 0.87. Of the four motivational dimensions, the strongest was international travel (overall mean score = 4.25), followed by academic (3.67), social (3.45), and escape (3.29).

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that four major motivation domains exist within study abroad program motivational attributes. These include desire for international travel, escape, academic, and social. Among these domains, desire for international travel is the most important motivation for students participating in study abroad programs. The international motivation domain consisted mostly of items relating to learning about new

Table 1
Factor Analysis of College Students' Motivations for Studying Abroad

Motivation Items	International	Escape	Academic	Social
Socially/culturally learn more about host country	0.786			
Interact with people in host country	0.771			
Experience culture of host country	0.733			
Meet people from different country	0.703			
Learn about host country	0.692			
Have an authentic experience with past cultures	0.637			
Get broader understanding of the world	0.610			
Visit several countries	0.580			
Travel outside of US	0.451			
Getaway from stressful situation		0.797		
Escape social boundaries		0.669		
Travel independently without family		0.664		
Escape day-to-day life		0.664		
Have convenience of prearranged travel		0.586		
Escape legal boundaries		0.545		
Develop close relationships with locals	0.433	0.457		
Earn six academic credits			0.818	
Earn academic credit while traveling			0.764	
Learn more about travel industry			0.641	
Explore career opportunities			0.627	
Show friends/family that have been to host country				0.773
Travel with friends				0.743
Buy goods and gifts from host country				0.743
Eigenvalue	7.35	2.21	1.95	1.42
Variance explained	31.96	9.61	8.51	6.20
Reliability (alpha)	0.874	0.814	0.803	0.746
Number of items	9	6	4	3
Mean	4.25	3.29	3.67	3.45
KMO	0.762			

Barlett's test of sphericity: 885.03, $df = 253$, $p < 0.001$.

countries, and experiencing new cultures. This motivation coincides with the traditional goal of study abroad programs: to provide students with a better rounded global education and for them to increase their “world-mindedness.” The second most important motivation was academic. Interestingly, academic motivation was of secondary importance for choosing study abroad program unless the program is integrated into the academic curriculum (Carlson et al., 1992). This is important for university administrators and the tourism industry that caters to study abroad students to take into account. Social reasons were also perceived as an important motivation for electing to participate in a study abroad program. The social motivation domain included items relating to establishing new friendships with other participants and peers while traveling, as well as the resulting social benefits of the trip upon returning home. Lastly, the escape motivation provides a medium for students to escape and have a sense of independence from family, friends, work, and their home society. This motivation domain, which is categorized as a “push factor,” is common to all leisure travelers (Iso-Ahola, 1980; Snepenger, King, Marshal, & Uysal, 2006; Uysal & Yoon, 2005). While the study abroad programs are designed primarily for academic reasons, the “escape” element is often ignored by university study abroad programs.

In order for a specific study abroad program to be successful, it needs to be marketed in a way that addresses the social motivations of students. The findings of this study are also applicable to the travel industry in general and specific to students and the young travel market, which is one of the largest tourism segments as well as one of the fastest growing (Jarvis & Peel, 2008).

Conclusion

The findings of this study provide insight for university officials, study abroad program leaders, and the student travel industry into the motivations of study abroad students. As this is a growing worldwide phenomenon, with an expanding economic impact, and greater support from governments, universities, and society, this study provides information that could be directly applied in the future of study abroad programs. University

officials and study abroad leaders can use these findings to better market and design the programs for students with the realization that students are motivated by more than just academic or international travel. The study provides strong empirical findings, which should be built upon by future research. Future research should consider expanding this study to include students from different source countries, programs that visit different regions, and programs of different time lengths so that it could be generalized.

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