

# What's a Month Worth?

## STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF WHAT THEY LEARNED ABROAD

*A study of one institution's short-term programs shows how participating students grow in ways their stay-at-home peers do not.*

BY LISA CHIEFFO AND LESA GRIFFITHS

**F**or individuals involved with international education, one of the greatest rewards of the profession comes when students return home from periods abroad and recount their stories of personal growth and learning—testimonials of life-changing experiences that make faculty and administrators smile. But what about the students who don't provide feedback? What is the average student learning during a semester abroad, or on an eight-week or month-long program overseas? How do the students themselves think they have been impacted by their experiences? Faculty and administrators who send or accompany students abroad have strong feelings about the academic and personal benefits that such a sojourn can bring. Yet the fact remains that, as a profession, international educators are ill-equipped to “prove” such assertions or even to supply reasonable evidence to support them, other than the usual list of inspiring anecdotal accounts.





### Why Make the Case?

Some may ask, “But why should we have to prove anything?” Good question. How many English departments are asked to demonstrate what their students are learning in Dickens class? Nevertheless, there is no question that having some reliable data about the impact of study abroad on students can help administrators garner support from faculty and other staff—especially if the findings indicate some measurable differences between students abroad and those on campus. In addition, it’s simply good practice to put one’s product under the microscope once in a while. Outcomes from rigorous assessment projects can be used to change existing programs and shape new ones to maximize the benefits to the participants.

Unfortunately, there is not much generalizable evidence to support the claim of study abroad’s life-changing benefits, or even of modest gains in cultural understanding or other qualities students are expected to acquire when they go overseas. Although there has been a good deal of education abroad research throughout the years, most studies have concentrated on specific programs and involved small numbers of students (sometimes fewer than 10). In addition, many of these studies do not compare the experiences of students abroad to those who remain on campus during the same period, thereby making it difficult to claim with credibility that going abroad is in any way more beneficial than staying home. The result is a patchwork of knowledge that international education professionals cannot draw upon as they make their case to decision-makers and compete with other campus units for limited resources.

Research on short-term programs deserves special consideration. Student participation in short-term education abroad programs has increased dramatically over the past few years, while interest in the traditional year abroad has waned. IIE’s *Open Doors* 2003 report “indicates that most students continue to study abroad for shorter sojourns (many for less than eight weeks), with more than 50 percent of U.S. undergraduate and master’s degree students electing summer, January term, internships, and other short-term programs instead of academic year or semester pro-

grams.” This trend warrants an increased initiative toward research on short-term programs in particular.

### The Survey

Seeing this need nationally and on its own campus, staff in the University of Delaware’s (UD) Center for International Studies (CFIS), with help from the Institutional Research and Planning Office, decided to investigate some of the impacts these programs are thought to have on students. As a national leader in short-term programs, UD was in a good position to do so. UD offers between 45 and 50 January and summer programs with more than 1,000 participants annually. In 2002, *Open Doors* report ranked UD sixth among research institutions in the percentage of students it sends abroad.

The goal of the project was to design a data-collection instrument that is easily transported and administered and which UD (and perhaps other institutions) could use year after year to evaluate the outcomes of virtually any month-long study abroad program. The CFIS staff chose to conduct an assessment of some of its winter session programs in January of 2003 since this is the most popular time for UD students to study abroad, and also because thousands of students take courses on campus during this time, so finding a comparison group wouldn’t be difficult. Since UD’s short-term programs are led by faculty from various academic departments, the programs do not have any commonly articulated goals, making traditional assessment techniques (such as pre- and post-testing a particular knowledge base or skill set) complicated, not to mention cumbersome to administer to such a large number of students. The task, therefore, was to devise a simple survey that was general enough to apply to a wide variety of programs abroad, and which could also be administered to students on campus.

With these challenges in mind, the researchers devised a one-page (front-and-back) anonymous survey that asked students to rate their own international awareness and involvement in international activities looking back over the past 30-days—the approximately length of most of UD’s short-term programs and the on-campus January term. The staff hypothe-

sized that, although students' experiences on dozens of programs would be very diverse, there is a common set of attitudes and activities that has relevance to students on any program. The front page of the survey therefore addressed these four general areas: communication, cultural issues, global interdependence, and functional knowledge. Students were asked to respond to two types of items, one rated on a Likert-scale (possible responses ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree), and one rated according to frequency. For example, students were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements such as, "I understand how foreign manufacturing affects the price of consumer goods in the U.S." and "I am patient with people in the U.S. who don't speak English well." For other items, they were

asked to recall how often they engaged in a particular activity during the last 30 days (for example thinking about a current issue that's important to the people of a developing country and looking up something on a map of another country).

The most difficult task was crafting wording that was also applicable to the experiences of students on campus. For example, instead of asking students whether they know how to make a telephone call to the United States from abroad, they were asked whether they know how to call another country. Instead of referring to "people in my host country," the survey asks about "people from other countries." The back of the survey solicited biographic data [gender, academic year, grade point average (GPA), and major] and gave students the opportunity to comment on the most important thing they learned in the past month, either in or out of the classroom. Students were also asked how many times they had studied or traveled abroad. The researchers tested the survey on more than 100 students on campus in the fall and made changes according to their feedback.

In January, faculty directors abroad, as well as instructors on campus, were asked to distribute the survey during the final week of their five-week course.

For the on-campus comparison group, courses were chosen that were identical or similar to those offered abroad. Intermediate Spanish, for example, is offered on campus in January as well as at two locations abroad, so students in that course were surveyed at all locations where it was taught. In cases where there was no identical

assessment methods, such as pre- and post-testing, would have been so labor-intensive as to greatly diminish the number of respondents and call into question the general applicability of the findings. Like most college and university study abroad offices, CFIS does not have the luxury of a full-time researcher on staff, so the time required for project set-up and data processing and analysis was certainly a consideration. In addition, the research team recognized the dearth of published, generalizable studies

on short-term programs and wanted to be able to make some observations that other institutions might find interesting and helpful. Given these realities, the decision was made to design a broad study, rather than an in-depth one (which may, however, lead to more focused initiatives in the future).

After the surveys were administered and collected, the initial data processing was

fairly simple. Students recorded their responses on the same type of computer scan sheets used for standard course evaluations at the university, so the existing procedure was used to generate computer files of the data. Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS brand statistical software with  $p < .05$ . Student responses to the short-answer question at the end of the survey were collected into a Microsoft Word file and subjected to an iterative process of qualitative analysis.

### Challenges and Solutions

Before administering the survey, the research team was concerned that demographic differences between the on-campus and abroad groups might be profound enough to skew the results. And in fact, there are some notable differences in the two populations. The gender breakdown for the on-campus respondents is 42 percent male and 58 percent female, while for respondents abroad it is 29 percent and 71 percent, respectively. This is in keeping with traditional study abroad enrollment patterns that show women going abroad at

## THESE DATA CONFIRM

what many have been saying all along about study abroad in general and about short-term study abroad in particular: that these programs do have broad-based benefits to students, regardless of program-specific goals and structures.

match, the researchers chose courses on campus that were at the same level as those abroad and that had some international or multicultural component, for example Politics of Developing Nations abroad versus American Foreign Policy on campus, both 300-level courses. The intent was to minimize the differences between the abroad and on-campus groups by assuming similar academic experiences (based on academic level of the course and similarity of content). In the end, the project yielded responses from more than 600 study abroad students and more than 400 on-campus students to analyze and compare. These represented 32 programs abroad and 32 sections of 22 courses on campus.

### The Scope and Expectations

Before discussing the findings it is important to note one caveat: This study did not measure actual student learning, attitude change, or skill acquisition, as many (usually smaller-scale) studies have attempted to do. Instead, researchers relied on students' perceptions and recollections of their attitudes and activities. More direct

about twice the rate of men (in this case even more than twice the rate). The abroad group contained a higher percentage of sophomores and juniors (62 percent versus 54 percent on campus) and had a higher self-reported GPA (74 percent with GPA over 3.0 versus 55 percent on campus). Finally, more than 40 percent of the students abroad categorized their major as professional or pre-professional (versus 30 percent on campus), while on-campus students were disproportionately represented by social science majors (25 percent versus 17 percent abroad). This is not surprising since many of UD's short-term programs abroad offer courses that are specific to pre-professional majors (such as engineering, animal science, and elementary education); these courses therefore attract a very high percentage of students in these majors.

Using a multivariate analysis of variance, researchers adjusted for these inequalities in gender, class, GPA, and major. When one compares the two groups with these controls in place, significant differences appear between the responses of on- and off-campus students for 15 of 20 survey items, indicating that those who studied abroad perceived that they had a greater sensitivity to language and culture, an improved functional knowledge of cultural practices, and a better understanding of global interdependence than students who remained on campus. (See tables 1 and 2) For example, the mean (average) response from students abroad to the statement, "I know how to make a phone call to someone in a different country" was almost 1.5, about midway between "strongly agree" and "agree." The mean response among on-campus students was about 2.4, somewhere between "agree" and "indifferent." The difference between these means was so great that it is deemed statistically significant. That is, the difference is large enough that it is very unlikely due to chance; therefore it must be due to true differences between the two groups of students. (Scores in the significance column that are less than .05 indicate items to which the two groups responded differently.)

There was no correlation between the number of times students had studied or traveled abroad and their responses to other survey items. And it is interesting to note that more than 40 percent of the on-

campus students reported never having been abroad.

### The Results

Students abroad generally reported engaging in international activities more frequently than those on campus, and they were more likely to agree with statements that reflected global and international concerns (see table 1). Seen in the aggregate, these findings are not surprising. One would expect, for example, that students who had been abroad would report a greater incidence of looking things up on maps of other countries and a greater level of confidence in placing a phone call to another country ("functional knowledge" items). Nevertheless, these data confirm what many have been saying all along about study abroad in general and about short-term study abroad in particular: that these programs do have broad-based benefits to students, regardless of program-specific goals and structure.

### Attitudes Towards Communication

It's therefore worthwhile to examine the responses to particular survey items to gain additional insights into students' perceptions. Let us consider some items related to communications, #3 and #7, for example. Students were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement, "I have re-

cently become more interested in attaining fluency in another language." Nearly 70 percent of the students in the abroad group agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, compared with more than 50 percent of their stay-at-home counterparts—this despite the fact that nearly 38 percent of the students on campus were enrolled in foreign language courses, while only 33 percent of the students abroad participated in programs with a significant foreign language component. In fact, more than 20 percent of the students on campus disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement about desire for language fluency. One can speculate that respondents who studied in non-English-speaking countries and were faced with daily interactions with the host population quickly realized the extent to which knowledge of the local language would have facilitated their encounters. This must be experiential learning at its best!

Related to this is the students' response to item #7, "I am patient with people in the U.S. who don't speak English well." Students abroad were, again, more likely to agree with this statement than those on campus. Surely this response rate must be related to the real-life struggles of the abroad group as they tested the patience of their non-English-speaking hosts, and they are now more understanding of the plight

**Table 1. MEANS AND SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ON-CAMPUS AND ABROAD RESPONDENTS**

(Controlling for Gender, Major, GPA, and Class)

Scale: 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = indifferent, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree

Survey Item	Mean Abroad N=665	Mean On Campus N=430	Significance
1 Know how to make phone call abroad	1.481	2.435	.000
2 Understand how foreign manufacturing affects U.S. prices	2.128	2.230	.574
3 Want to attain fluency in a foreign language	1.844	2.370	.008
4 Can explain one aspect of U.S. foreign policy	2.065	2.630	.004
5 Know dollar conversion rate	1.427	2.411	.000
6 Comfortable understanding U.S. trade relations	2.211	2.540	.083
7 Patient with people who don't speak English well	1.820	2.274	.013
8 Can communicate in another language	2.333	2.870	.010
9 Want to learn more geography	2.108	2.486	.031
10 Recently developed appreciation for arts	1.905	2.646	.000

of non-English speakers they may encounter at home.

### New Perspectives and Interests

Another interesting item is #10, “I have recently developed a greater appreciation for the arts (in the form of buildings, paintings, literary works, etc.)” A student on campus who attended a play or concert, visited a museum, or took a theater or art history course could have agreed strongly with this statement, and 22 percent did. But the responses of students who studied abroad were significantly more positive than the at-home group (41 percent strongly agreed with the statement), indicating that live exposure to the arts, even for a period as brief as one month, had a noteworthy impact on students’ interest level.

### Global Awareness

Survey items related to global interdependence surely took on enhanced significance to students in January 2003 as the impending war with Iraq was debated around the globe. However, the impact of current events on the students’ survey responses was unclear. In some cases, students abroad and on campus differed markedly in their responses, yet in others their answers were statistically identical. For example, students were asked to reflect on how often in the past 30 days they had consciously withheld judgment on a controversial international event until they

learned more facts (item #14). The average responses to this item were virtually identical, averaging 2.6 for the abroad group and 2.8 for the on-campus group (somewhere between frequently and occasionally). The same can be said for item #6, “I feel comfortable in my understanding of U.S. trade relations with at least one foreign country,” and item #2, “I understand how foreign manufacturing affects the price of consumer goods in the U.S.” In both of these instances there was no statistical difference between the two groups. Yet students abroad were more confident than those on campus about their ability to explain some aspect of U.S. foreign policy to someone from a foreign country (item #4), and they reported a much greater frequency of reading an article, watching a TV show, or speaking to someone about how Americans are viewed by people from other countries (item #11). This may be explained by positing that students abroad are more likely than students on campus to be prompted by outside stimuli to engage with these issues, for example as they come into contact with host nationals. (While one could argue that students on campus are exposed to a more skewed American perspective because they don’t have the same access to international media as do those abroad, one must keep in mind that a great many non-American news agencies have Web sites in English—not to mention the availability of online radio broadcasts. Today’s students

are tech-savvy enough to find this information if they want it.)

### Differences Among Disciplines

An interesting sidebar to #11 has to do with the differences in responses between the various groups of majors. On average, students abroad responded with 2.2 and those on campus with 2.6 to the statement, “During the last 30 days I read an article, watched a TV show, or spoke to someone about how Americans are viewed by people from other countries.” This means that students abroad reported engaging in these activities more often than those on campus. This difference in behavior was more pronounced for students in natural science, professional, and pre-professional majors, than for students in the humanities and social sciences. The professional and science majors reported a lower frequency of activity than the other majors on campus, but when abroad, these students engaged in such activity at the same level as other majors. This indicates that the experience abroad resulted in varying degrees of behavior change for different majors. Students who, either because of personal preference or the demands of their major, do not engage in many “global awareness” activities on campus, may be stimulated to do so abroad. Further inquiry into the behavioral differences among majors (and other categories of students) is beyond the scope of this study, but an area ripe for continued research.

**Table 2. MEANS AND SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ON-CAMPUS AND ABROAD RESPONDENTS**

Scale: 1 = a lot (more than 10 times), 2 = frequently (couple times a week), 3 = occasionally (about once a week), 4 = rarely, 5 = never

Survey Item	Mean Abroad N=665	Mean On Campus N=430	Significance
11 Read article/watched TV about how Americans are viewed	2.183	2.625	.022
12 Watched non-American news, TV	2.015	3.400	.000
13 Consciously withheld judgment on intl. event	2.632	2.754	.512
14 Thought about differences btw. me & people in other countries	1.722	2.388	.000
15 Looked up something on map of other country	2.463	3.316	.000
16 Thought about similarities btw. me & people in other countries	2.039	2.765	.000
17 Looked up non-English word in dictionary	2.555	2.646	.732
18 Thought about issue important to developing country	2.537	2.882	.099
19 Thought about why other countries have different perspective than U.S.	2.230	2.903	.000
20 Listened to music sung in language other than English	1.968	3.098	.000

### Thinking About ‘the Other’

The abroad group reported thinking much more often about similarities and differences between themselves and people in other countries (items #14 and #16). Nearly 90 percent reported thinking about differences frequently or a lot (versus about 50 percent of the students on campus), and about 80 percent considered their similarities often (compared with about 40 percent of the on-campus group). Study abroad participants also more frequently thought about why other countries have a different perspective than the U.S. on global issues (item #19). And yet both groups of students responded similarly to item #18, “I thought about a current issue that’s important to the people of a developing country,” with a relatively low level of frequency. The

average response of the abroad group (2.5) is puzzling since more than 20 percent of the students participated in programs in developing countries; a higher average frequency would be expected.

### Reading Between the Lines

Information gleaned from the qualitative analysis (students' responses to the short-answer item at the end of the survey), was particularly telling on a number of points. Students were allotted approximately one half-page of space to respond to the question, "What do you think is the most important thing you have learned in the past month, either in or out of the classroom? (This may or may not pertain to international awareness.)" Although the abroad group was only about 50 percent larger than the on-campus group, those students produced 100 percent more commentary.

This indicates, if nothing else, that students had a lot to say about what they think they learned while abroad. The students' comments were sorted into 23 categories according to topic, with labels such as "language/communication issues," "tolerance/patience/understanding," "acknowledgement of foreign views of U.S.," and "trip/travel-related." For example, if a student wrote that the most important thing learned in the past month was how to ride the Tube in London, this comment was categorized as "trip/travel-related."

It is not surprising that the students' responses varied tremendously depending on whether they spent the month abroad or on campus. On-campus students were much more likely to report that the most important thing learned was something directly related to the content of the course they were taking—75 percent of the comments in the "course-related knowledge" category were made by on-campus students, though these students represented just 39 percent of the total sample. On-campus students also reported learning about current events, "life lessons" ("It doesn't matter what you know,

but who you know"), and how to deal with personal matters. As one can imagine, the students abroad reported learning about a much broader array of categories. In fact, many students found it difficult to name "the" most important thing learned and actually wrote about several realizations and experiences. The most frequent comment (made by about 13 percent of the abroad group) was related to the appreciation and/or the acquisition of knowledge of another country and/or culture. (A handful of

U.S. students as a gateway to their greater international awareness. Furthermore, the results tentatively support the conclusion that—despite their short length—such programs may have a significant impact on the international orientation of students, perhaps even over the future course of their academic and professional careers.

Of course, the opportunities for further study are innumerable: What lasting impact, if any, do short-term programs have on students? The limited time span of

these programs certainly allows for an increased likelihood of participation in multiple overseas opportunities, leading to exposure to multiple cultures. Is there a trend towards such "serial participation," and, if so, how are students affected by their experiences? The relative ease of establishing a short-term program abroad (as opposed

to a semester-long program) has already led to participation by students and faculty in previously unrepresented academic disciplines. How might new program models alter the traditional profile of education abroad with regard to geographic site diversity and participant diversity? How short can a program be and still have any impact at all? Do students who have studied abroad on a short program subsequently choose more courses with an international focus than those who don't study abroad? For the time being these and many other questions remain unanswered. UD researchers will continue to administer their existing instrument and gather data each January so that they can begin to draw some general conclusions about the impacts of these programs and provide a basis for future inquiry.

— Lisa Chieffo is associate director of student programs, and Lesa Griffiths is director, Center for International Studies, University of Delaware. Other members of the UD research team Bahram Rajaei and Karen Webber-Bauer contributed to this article.

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on-campus students made such a comment as well! Perhaps they befriended a foreign student or had another type of cross-cultural experience during the month.) More than 8 percent commented that they had learned about tolerance, patience, understanding, and what it's like to feel foreign. Almost equally as popular were comments that acknowledged a foreign view of the United States and differences between the United States and the host country. Individual comments such as these are often cited as evidence of the benefits of study abroad, but when one can point to dozens of them as the response to a question about the most important thing learned overseas, the statements are much more persuasive and their impact much greater.

### Questions for the Future

Findings indicate that even short-term study abroad has a significant impact on students' perceived acquisition of internationally related knowledge. The CFIS staff believes that these findings are noteworthy and underscore the utility and benefits of short-term education abroad programs for