

Spring 2016

New Country, New You!

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Recommended Citation

Hogan, Allison and Leonard, Brittany, "New Country, New You!" (2016). *Honors Program Capstone Projects*. Paper 6.

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Senior Honors Capstone

New Country, New You!

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HON4002H

SPA4900-A

In the spring 2015 semester, we both traveled to Bilbao, Spain, where we lived for 5 months and went to school at the University of Deusto. We both enrolled in rigorous Spanish classes where we were challenged to develop our language skills, as well as our ability to adapt to a foreign culture. We believe that the impact this semester had on us can be seen in many aspects of our lives. After spending an entire semester abroad, we were intrigued to discover if there was any scientific evidence to backup our personal standpoint. Furthermore, we were interested to see whether or not the perceived outcomes could be generalized to a larger population or if we could use this information to help promote study abroad programs to prospective students. At the completion of our research, we wanted to answer the following question: what are the benefits of study abroad programs and what impact do they have on students' personal and professional growth? Based on the literature and empirical studies available to us, we can conclude that studying abroad does have positive impacts on the average college student, and it contributes to their overall development.

When considering this topic, there are several factors to consider that could potentially affect the person's experience, including the length and quality of the program, the language spoken abroad, whether or not the student lives with a host family, financial stability, the courses available at the university, the amount of traveling done outside of the program, etc. For the purpose of this paper, we will consider all of these factors, but we will specifically focus on the benefits gained from studying abroad in a non-English speaking country. We hope to portray the advantages this has on a student's overall personal development, as well as their career choice and marketability as they become an upcoming candidate to the business world.

While everyone has a unique experience abroad, almost all can relate to the same skills they gained overseas. A survey conducted by Dwyer and Peters highlights the percentages of

students who felt study abroad caused an increase in personal development, academic commitment, intercultural development, and career development. This study focused on alumni from IES (Institute for the International Education of Students) study abroad programs from 1950 to 1999. This study revealed that over 90% of students agreed study abroad increased self-confidence, served as a catalyst for increased maturity, and has had a lasting impact on world view. Over 95% of students reported they were able to better understand their own cultural values after studying abroad. To summarize how much students learn while studying abroad, Carolyn Valtos says it perfectly, “Overall, I learned a lot more about myself in that one semester than i did in the three and a half years in my home school because of the unique space in which I learned, experienced, and spent exploring another culture” (Dwyer & Peters).

Not all learning abroad is done in the classroom. Stone and Petrick (2013) introduce the idea that traveling alone broadens the minds of individuals. Traveling is considered under the umbrella of experiential learning, which is learning by doing. Stone and Petrick (2013) describe Meyer-Lee and Evans’ (2007) idea that “within experiential learning, content knowledge can lead to personal growth, which can lead to an openness and to more learning”. The authors then go on to describe certain characteristics that students gain while abroad. Some of these outcomes include a “change of perspective or worldview, independence, self-confidence, intercultural development, global engagement, and dispelling of stereotypes” (Stone & Petrick, 2013). While students can be taught how to obtain these characteristics in a classroom, they do not directly gain them unless they go out into the world and work towards them.

In addition to achieving personal development while abroad, students also gain professional development. The same study by Dwyer and Peters that showed high numbers in personal development also revealed statistics about professional development. The survey

showed 83% to 90% of students felt a reinforcement in committing to learning a foreign language study. This percentage is significant due to the possibility that these people would not have stuck with a foreign language if it was not for their experience in another country. Having this foreign language background makes students much more marketable. Working in the United States involves working with a large amount of varying nationalities. Therefore, having a background in a foreign language can be the deciding factor for some companies. As for their careers, a compelling amount of students reported that they acquired skills that influenced their career paths, and their experience sparked an interest in a career direction that they pursued after going abroad.

Professionally speaking, what is the true value of studying abroad? Is it worth it in the long run? Numbers and statistics produced in a study by Isabel Eva Bohrer (2015) support yes; studying abroad is almost always worth it. The findings of this study reports “Nearly 90% of study abroad alumni secured a job within the first six months after graduation”. “50% felt the overseas experience helped them acquire their first job skills”. “84% felt that studying abroad helped them develop valuable job skills such as foreign language knowledge, cultural training, tolerance for ambiguity, communication, and more”. “90% were admitted into their first or second choice graduate or professional school” (Bohrer, 2015). These statistics show how valuable study abroad can be for students in the long run. It not only is a life changing experience, but it is also extremely beneficial when it comes to finding a career.

By students building their professional skills by learning in a foreign country, they are building their resume simply by writing ‘study abroad’. The same study by Bohrer (2015) that specified certain professional skills those who study abroad are able to gain also shows what businesses see when they see those two words written on a resume. Bohrer explains businesses

see foreign language fluency, international knowledge, cross-cultural communication, analytical skills, teamwork skills, flexibility, the ability to manage finances, and independence without it being explicitly written. All of these skills are crucial to both businesses and graduate schools. Bohrer (2015) quotes Dr. Allan E. Goodman, President and CEO, Institute of International Education, “International experience is one of the most important components of a 21st century resume”. Professionals expect their employees to either have these skills, or be able to learn them quickly. If a potential candidate already has these qualities, they are much more likely to get the job over someone who does not have those qualities.

A 2012 study by Kendra Preston focused on the impacts studying abroad had on obtaining a job after graduation with an undergraduate degree. The survey was sent out to 31,439 alumni who had studied abroad in all different majors. The results of the survey highlight how quickly they were hired for a job. According to the study, “89% got their first job within 6 months of graduation, with almost half securing a job while still in school”. Most recent graduates struggle to find a job after graduation with today’s economy; however the majority of those who studied abroad were able to find employment right after graduation.

Out of all the professional skills a person may gain from studying abroad, there are a few specific qualities that seem to be more useful than others. For example, by studying abroad in a non-English speaking country, a person is bound to pick up some, if not a great deal, of the language. In the United States, the second most common language spoken is Spanish. It is true that a large amount of students in America have taken a Spanish language course at some point in their life. If these students were to travel to Spain, they would be able to pick up on more of the language and build upon their previous skills. After returning from their travels, these students would have more language skills than someone who has not traveled to a Spanish-

speaking country. For many businesses and companies, knowing another language would be a huge bonus. One alumnus who responded to a study conducted by Kimberly Franklin in 2010 commented on how they felt they are an asset to their employer. The alumnus reports, “1) Language fluency; 2) Cross-cultural communication. These two things allow me to be effective in my work with people from all over the world. My language skills make me more readily employable and my cross-cultural communication makes me more effective once hired” (Franklin, 2010). This individual’s perspective can be generalized to the larger population of students who have studied abroad in a non-English speaking country.

Students in higher education feel the pressure to study abroad because businesses are looking for this qualification more and more as they go through the hiring process. An interesting point that we came across was that “a majority of American CEOs serve in senior positions abroad for two or more years. Equally telling is the fact that the most important international skill sought by firms is an understanding of cross-cultural differences” (Schnusenber, 2012). This is interesting to consider because many high-paying positions involve traveling to other cities, states, and countries, and the ability to work with people from all over the world is an important characteristic to possess. When employers see “study abroad” listed on a candidate’s resumé, or proficiency in a second language, they are immediately intrigued by their cultural competence and are far more likely to extend a job offer to these individuals (Schnusenber, 2012).

After spending 5 months in Bilbao, Spain, and having about 6 months to reflect on my experiences there, I came to the conclusion that it was the most influential experience I have had in my entire life. I gained skills I otherwise would have never gained, and I was able to experience the world in a way unlike any other. While there are endless benefits of studying

abroad, I also experienced some situations I would change given the opportunity. Some of these situations include my living situation, my travels, and how I spent my free time. My living arrangements in Bilbao were unlike the rest of the people in my program whereas I lived in an apartment with two other American students and the rest of the program lived with host families. This is my number one regret. If I had the chance to study abroad again, I would not live in an apartment with other Americans. I would want to live with a host family for multiple reasons; the first being the language aspect. While I would go home and speak English to my roommates, my friends would go home and speak Spanish. I would have had much more practice and experience with the language if I was forced to speak it at home. I would also live with a host family for the fact that I would have the experience of having a family in another country. I would get the first-hand experience of what families are like in a foreign setting.

The traveling I was able to do during my experience was nothing short of incredible. I was able to visit six different countries in Europe and eight different cities in Spain. However, in some of these places I would have done some things differently. For example, in Ireland, I would have tried to experience more of life like the locals instead of all touristy things. I have zero regret in doing all of the activities I did, but I wish I could have spent more time getting to know the locals and what they do in their spare time.

Similar to my opinion on how I spent my time traveling, I also wish I spent more time with the locals in Bilbao. While I was immersed with three Spanish students in one of my classes (whom I became good friends with), I wish I could have spent more time with them outside of class. Too late in the semester did I start to live like a local. If I had the opportunity to do it again, I would spend time exploring the city and finding cool new spots where locals hung out.

Even with the situations that I would change, there are an abundance of things I would not change for the world such as the skills I gained, the friends I gained, and the opinions I made. While I was abroad, I became more independent, patient, culturally-aware, understanding, flexible, adaptable, and open-minded just to name a few. I also made a handful of reliable friends that I am still in touch with. The people that go through this life-changing experience with you are the only ones who can truly relate to your time abroad which right away brings them close. It would be difficult to lose a friend who went through such a personal time with you.

When I arrived in Spain, I was a Human Development: Elementary Education major with a Spanish minor. When I left Spain, I was a Human Development: School & Society and Spanish double major. In those short five months I changed my major and my career path. Originally, I thought that I wanted to be a teacher, and I figured a Spanish minor would help, but now I want to work in Higher Education student involvement with hopes of one day being fluent in the language. Studying abroad opened my eyes to more opportunities at my home university that I wish I was involved in sooner. In my future career, I hope to persuade students to be more involved than I was. For my decision in adding a Spanish major, I believe it will be helpful because not everyone speaks two languages and having that background could possibly land me a job one day.

Similar to Allison, I have spent a lot of time reflecting on my experiences abroad. After spending 5 months away from home and seeing an entirely different culture, I feel that I have grown exponentially. I am so much more independent and willing to put myself out there, and this experience has made me realize how much I am capable of. I also met some amazing people throughout my travels. I lived with a host family, which consisted of a single mother, fifty years

old, and a student from Texas who was also in my program. Our host-mom provided us with breakfast, lunch, and dinner each day, and she made us feel very at home in such a foreign place. She spoke to us in Spanish and taught us a lot about the history and culture of Spain. The best decision I ever made was living with a host family because I believe it gave me much more practice speaking and listening to the language, and I felt safe because I had a motherly figure looking out for me on a daily basis. I also made friends from all over the U.S., and I hope to keep in touch with these people for the rest of my life. They may also serve as points of contact in the future if I ever need assistance during my travels, or perhaps a job opportunity.

In terms of my academic and career goals, this experience has completely altered my plans. Originally, I had wanted to be a high school teacher and teach Spanish in a suburban setting. I thought that by traveling and fully immersing myself in the Spanish language and culture, I would be fluent upon my return and increase my marketability. Although my Spanish improved drastically, I was still unable to pass the Spanish MTEL in order to become a teacher, and I was encouraged to change my major.

Throughout my experiences, I learned that I love to travel and explore new places, and I enjoy communicating with people in a different language. This semester made me realize that I want to continue with this for the rest of my life. I am now working towards becoming a study abroad advisor on a college campus, and I plan to pursue a master's degree in higher education. Before this trip, I had no intentions of taking on this role. However, I have realized that I am capable of all the tasks this position would demand, and I strongly believe that this experience has had a major impact on my professional decision.

If I were to relive my entire semester abroad, there is very little I would change. The only thing I would do differently would be to plan-out my weekend travels ahead of time so that I

could make the most of my time there. Spain is made up of 15 different regions, which allows for much diversity and places to travel. It is also easily accessible to the rest of Europe. Although I made it to seven countries in five short months, I wish I managed my time a little better so that I could venture into a few more regions or countries while I was there in order to explore more of the culture.

When you go abroad, the possibilities are endless. You are basically thrown into a foreign country with unfamiliar people, language, food, transportation, and there's nothing more terrifying. However, it's incredibly exhilarating at the same time. Every day poses a new challenge, a new discovery, a new exploration of who you are as a person, and at the end of the day, there is nothing more rewarding than seeing how far you have come in such a short amount of time. I have so many memories, stories, and everlasting experiences that I will remember for the rest of my life, and I hope more students will take the opportunity to go abroad and discover the world that awaits them.

“The emphasis on study abroad programs is growing in the academic context as U.S. based universities seek to incorporate a global perspective in education,” (Rai, 2002). Colleges and universities make it as feasible as possible for their students to go abroad and gain this wonderful experience because this opportunity promotes multicultural understanding and teaches students more than they could ever learn inside a classroom. It is true that any student could write a research paper on the history and culture of Spain, or recite a presentation without using a single word of English. However, it is not until they physically get out into the world and use their language skills to communicate or discover the culture themselves that they can truly gain knowledge of the world.

In an article that discusses student intention to study abroad, researchers hypothesize that this intention is based on affordability, willingness to pay, and desire to go. Additionally, this willingness to pay could be impacted by family expectations, the type of job an individual is pursuing, or support from school administration. These researchers' goal was to come up with a few solutions that universities could use in order to improve their marketing tactics for study abroad programs. One conclusion they made was to target the parents of these students, who are often the financial providers of this experience. They suggested that universities break-up the costs of these programs into categories such as flights, room and board, day trips, hotel stays, meals, etc., and convince parents that the sum of the amount is reasonable. Another strategy they could use is to host events where alumni or students who have previously studied abroad are invited to share their experiences and how it has affected their job search. Perhaps these universities could also target prospective students, meaning students who have not committed to the college yet, and convince them that they can earn credits abroad for just a slight increase in tuition per year (Schnusenberg, 2012). Marketability of these programs and increasing students' desire to pay for this experience is a major factor in the number of students who actually go abroad. This is important for universities to realize as they attempt to increase their study abroad population.

Furthermore, in order to take a different perspective on why this global understanding is so important, we analyzed the impact of international students in the U.S. In a recent study, a questionnaire was mailed to 111 dean offices across the U.S. regarding international students. The administrators of these schools were asked to answer questions that pointed out the foreseen benefits of having international students on their college's campus. Whereas not all students are capable of traveling abroad due to financial restrictions, availability in programs, major

requirements, etc., colleges promote diversity so that students can gain a global understanding while staying at their home campus. The college faculty claim that global interdependence is increasing dramatically, and by accepting international students, they are stimulating awareness by contributing different perspectives to global issues. Likewise, as Americans travel abroad, they are gaining a similar experience while contributing their perspectives to a foreign university. After returning to one's home country, it is possible that the connections they have made overseas could have a significant impact on their career development. Perhaps in the future, these connections could "open up an opportunity for comparative research, networking, and collaboration with foreign institutions and organizations," (Rai, 2002).

After researching this question, what are the benefits of study abroad programs and what impact do they have on students' personal and professional growth?, we can conclude that it is imperative that other students go abroad. Overall, this experience of traveling to a foreign country and expanding one's knowledge of culture, language, and diversity, helps to create a very strong candidate for the professional world. It allows people to be more flexible and accepting of differences, and it improves intercommunication skills. Any amount of time spent in a foreign culture will be beneficial to an individual because it provides them with the opportunity to learn and develop as they step out of their comfort zone and strengthen their cultural competence. Colleges and universities should continue to improve their marketing techniques in order to persuade more students to go abroad because the more adaptable a person is to their environment, the more suited they will be for the workforce.

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