Benefits and Preparation for an International Study Abroad Experience:
A Student’s Perspective

Meredith McGowan
Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications
Texas A&M University
College Station, TX 77843
E-mail: mmcgowan03@yahoo.com

Abstract
In a world that continues to move rapidly toward globalization, it is important for students to expand their global awareness and gain international experience. Study abroad programs offer students an excellent way to develop themselves both personally and professionally. Entering a foreign country and/or university setting can be an overwhelming life and cultural transition, and it is important to remember that despite all that is learned while abroad, problems will arise. With proper preparation and a clear understanding of what might happen during an international learning experience, possible complications during the transition process can be alleviated so that students gain the most from their study abroad experience.

Keywords: Study Abroad, Travel, Students
**Introduction**

Internationalization of curriculum and globalizing U. S. Colleges of Agriculture in order to prepare students to work in an increasingly interdependent world are reoccurring themes as one delves into educational resources and involves oneself in the educational sector.

Brooks, Frick, and Bruening (2006) found “study abroad programs were widely recognized by survey respondents as the most valuable internationalization technique…” (p. 100). Although other, more cost-effective means of participating in an international experience, such as using multimedia to create a virtual international experience have been suggested (Boyd, Felton & Dooley, 2004), Tritz (1997) explained “such exchange programs [study abroad programs] and others have helped numerous students gain an international perspective that could not have been taught in the classroom” (p. 49). Boyd et al. (2004) added “…simulations cannot be compared to study abroad courses…” (p. 67).

However, without proper preparation and knowledge of what to expect when entering another country, one will not reap the full benefits from such a program. The outcomes of an educational experience in an international setting are highly dependent upon the extent to which the participant in the experience has been prepared for it (Tritz, 1997).

**Why Study Abroad?**

For most people in the world, direct experience with other countries and cultures is infrequent or nonexistent (Ludwig, 1994). Study abroad programs provide an opportunity for students to gain international experience, to learn about other people and embrace their culture, to explore the world, broaden their horizons, and to escape the perception that “their” country is the center of the universe. Such programs open students’ minds to people with different ideas and values (Zhai & Scheer, 2002), spark interest in international issues and change students’ global perspectives. Zhai and Scheer found that students who had studied abroad, “saw how much the United States influences other countries” and, “gained appreciation, respect, and understanding of their host country and culture” (p. 26). In the same study, international educational experiences were shown to facilitate personal growth and boost self-confidence. Regarding self-efficacy, 78% of the students believed that their study abroad experience was a great confidence builder for them. The confidence came from being able to survive in such different countries, the coping and travel skills they gained, and the ability to share their experience and knowledge with others. (p. 25)

International educational experiences provide the opportunity for professional growth as well. By entering a career with a global perspective and knowledge of how people from other cultures work, students have an advantage over their counterparts who have not experienced life abroad. “Today one in six U. S. jobs is directly tied to international trade” (Bruening & Shao, 2005, p. 48), and “multinational companies seek employees with cross-cultural and language skills” (Acker & Scanes, 1998, p. 60). Bickson (as cited in Wingenbach et al., 2003) stated that corporate administrators noted almost all future jobs will either require or benefit from global awareness and understanding.

**Preparation**

Despite all that is learned while abroad, problems do arise. Therefore, it is crucial to have a clear understanding of what might happen during an international learning experience (Tritz & Martin, 1997). Intelligent preparation is essential in making your international experience successful and satisfying (Carey, 2002).
University Requirements

It is imperative that students plan ahead if they intend to study abroad. A good place to begin is at the university study abroad office where a study abroad advisor will be able to explain the application process and specify deadlines. Generally, paperwork is due at the beginning of the semester prior to when the student plans on leaving the country. Your study abroad office may also be able to offer you contact information of students who have already experienced the program you are considering.

Keep in mind that most programs require proof of international insurance before departure. If your existing insurance does not cover Emergency Medical Evacuation and Repatriation of Remains, you should investigate and purchase additional insurance. A listing of international insurance providers is available online (http://www.insuranceabroad.com/).

Government Requirements

When traveling abroad, students must carry some form of identity such as a passport or birth certificate. Passport applications can be found at your local district clerk’s office or the U. S. Department of State Web site (http://travel.state.gov). Allow six to eight months before departure for your application to be processed (L. Tauferner, personal communication, February 23, 2007). According to the U. S. Department of State (http://travel.state.gov, 2007), as of January 23, 2007, citizens from the United States, Canada, Mexico, and Bermuda must present a passport to re-enter the U. S. by air from any part of the Western Hemisphere.

Entry and exit requirements for visas will vary by country and can be researched at the U. S. Department of State’s Web site. Allow a minimum of two to three months for processing of your visa and consult the consular office nearest you for application forms (L. Tauferner, personal communication, February 23, 2007). A complete and official listing of the foreign consular offices in the U. S. can be found on the U. S. Department of State’s Web site (http://www.state.gov/s/cpr/rls/fco/fallwinter2/).

Financial Preparation

Costs associated with traveling and studying abroad were one of the primary concerns expressed by students considering participation in a study abroad program (Wingenbach, Chmielewski, Smith, Piña & Hamilton, 2006). Cost however, should not be a determinant. With minimal effort and proper planning, students will find many financial aid opportunities exist to alleviate the financial burden of studying in another country. In addition to study abroad offices, students should seek out scholarships from their academic department, agricultural organizations, and hometown businesses and clubs.

Medical Requirements

Medical requirements and recommendations differ by country. If you are unsure about a country’s requirements, check the Center for Disease Control and Prevention Web site (http://www.cdc.gov/travel/vaccinat.htm) which provides a list of recommended and required vaccinations and preventative medicines.

Culture Shock

Culture shock is the anxiety one feels when traveling to a completely new environment. It usually sets in after the first few weeks of being in a country and has been shown to be a central barrier to participation in global opportunities (Wingenbach et al., 2006). It is important for students to remember that there will be a time when they feel frustrated, mad, or sad during their study abroad experience; this is a normal process in cross-cultural adjustment.
Packing

Many travelers have a tendency to “over pack” for their first study abroad experience. The following list of items should not be overlooked when preparing for international travel.

- Extra change of clothes packed in carry-on luggage (lost luggage happens);
- Gifts for host family and friends (homemade crafts that are special to your state or country);
- Home photos (people are curious about your way of life);
- Laptop (school work, photos, etc.);
- First-aid kit (small travel kits available at most outdoor shops);
- Three copies of visa, passport, international insurance and vaccination record (carry one with you, pack one in your luggage, and leave one at home with trustworthy source);
- Two copies of emergency contact information sheet (take one with you and leave one at home);
- Travelers checks, credit card, ATM card (I found using ATMs to be the easiest for cash, but this varies by country. Also, remember most credit card companies charge an extra percentage of the total purchase price for purchases made in foreign countries.);
- Journal (You will be glad you maintained a written account of your experiences. Even if you are not accustomed to keeping a journal, I recommend you do so during your time abroad.); and
- Extra credit card for emergencies.

Recommendations

Regardless of how well one has prepared for their study abroad experience, mistakes can happen. It is better to learn from others’ mistakes, than to make them yourself. Following are some personal lessons learned from my study abroad experiences (Mexico).

1. **Study a foreign language for at least two years before going abroad.** Although most programs require only two semesters of foreign language training, I suggest studying the language for at least two years. Learning a foreign language is harder for some than others. Be it hard or easy, it is important to keep in mind that once you enter a country, you will be immersed in a completely new lifestyle without the comforts of home. Language and communication related problems are seen as one of the most difficult challenges for international students (Zhai, 2004), and having a strong grasp of the language will alleviate many communication difficulties, making the transition into a new culture much easier. It is amazing how hard the simplest task can be when you cannot understand what you are being told nor say what you would like to say.

2. **Remember: it is not weird, it is different.** For most people, their first response when they see, taste, or experience something different is to think that because it is not what they expected, it is weird. The truth is that it is only different. An international experience is a beneficial, worthwhile endeavor, and an open mind and positive attitude are two of the most important criteria for making the most of it (Tritz & Martin, 1997). Take advantage of your time in another country; learn as much as you can about a new culture, experience it, try new foods, travel, and keep an open mind.

3. **Do not lose sight of your goals.** Learning a foreign language can be very difficult. No matter how frustrated you get, do not give up. Keep in mind, however, there will be days when you do not want to hear or speak another word of the foreign language. This is normal. Spend a few hours each day speaking your
native language or take the whole day off. Listen to your favorite music; watch a movie in your native language; do something with those from your home country. Do not feel like you are wasting your time abroad by taking a break, but also never lose sight of the reason you chose to study abroad. Give yourself some time to relax and then continue learning.

4. **Be careful what you eat and drink.** When you first arrive, you may want to try every new food you see. Be careful! Gradually introduce new foods into your diet. Wash fruits and vegetables well and try to stay away from those you cannot peel or boil. Stay away from street food and if you are not sure the water is safe to drink, use only bottled water.

5. **Spend time with host country students.** Rather than spending all your time with students from your own country, make friends with host country students and spend quality time with them. Doing so will greatly improve your language skills and build lifelong friendships.

6. **If possible, study abroad for a full year.** By the end of the first semester, you most likely will have adjusted to a new culture, gained confidence in your communication skills, and established relationships with host country students and families. You will find yourself communicating more easily, find that you are able to absorb more information, and that you have more overall confidence as you continue with a second semester.

**Summary**

As America becomes more globalized, it is important for tomorrow’s leaders to have in-depth global knowledge and first-hand international experience; a study abroad program is an excellent way to achieve these qualities. International experiences foster cultural awareness, change perceptions, and garner a more worldly perspective (Tritz & Martin, 1997). They provide an opportunity for personal growth, offer students a chance to greatly improve their foreign language skills, and give them an added advantage over their fellow counterparts in the professional world.

Entering a foreign country and/or university can be an overwhelming life and cultural transition. Preparation aids students with cross-cultural adjustments and makes experiencing another culture more enjoyable resulting in a more rewarding study abroad program.

**References**


