The Influence of International Study Abroad Programs on Agricultural College Students

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to determine the influence of participation in a study abroad program (SAP) on college students’ level of development in terms of global perspective, attitudes toward cultural diversity, and self-efficacy. In addition, this study also sought to investigate students’ changes in their career interests, attitudes toward both host and home countries, knowledge and skills they gained from SAPs, and motivation for participation in SAPs. The sample consisted of 18 out of 21 students who went to study abroad programs in summer 1999. Data were collected via interviews. Qualitative data obtained from interviews were analyzed using inductive data analysis. It was found that students’ global perspective was enhanced by the SAPs along with intercultural sensitivity, in which participants were more aware of and open to cultural diversity. The experience provided new challenges to participants and assisted them in becoming more confident. Study abroad students were also more likely to develop favorable attitudes toward their host country accompanied by some criticism toward the United States. Students gained new knowledge and skills from study abroad experience. Personal interests, peer influence, desire to experience something different and cost were important factors in motivating students to participate in SAPs. The findings have implications on understanding outcomes of SAPs in higher education, especially in colleges of agriculture.
Introduction

The world has been experiencing rapid changes in interconnection and interdependence. The advanced technological, political, cultural, economic, and ecological systems provide connections among people and cultures worldwide (Hutchins, 1996; Kauffman, Martin, Weaver & Weaver, 1992; Carlson, J.S., Burn, B.B. Useem, J. & Yachimowicz, D., 1990). To educate and empower our next generation to live effectively in such a shrinking world, colleges and universities today are faced with a major problem of making a university education relevant in a global society (Kauffman, Martin, Weaver & Weaver, 1992). Study abroad programs (SAPs) have become the most visible and popular international activity to enrich and broaden students’ international competency at college and university campuses. With an increase in the number of institutions and students participating in SAPs, more research is needed to document the contribution that SAPs make to students and their educational development. Even though previous research covered a vast variety of issues related to SAPs, there are still research gaps which warrant further study. In particular with agricultural students, since few studies have focused on that population. A better understanding of the influence of SAPs on agricultural students can provide a foundation for policy development in colleges of agriculture. Research findings can also aid international program administrators, advisors, faculty, and student personnel practitioners in developing programs that will maximize students’ learning and personal growth opportunities throughout their college years.

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to determine the influence of participation in a study abroad program (SAP) on agricultural college students’ level of development in terms of global perspective, attitudes toward cultural diversity, and self-efficacy. In addition, this study also sought to investigate students’ changes in their career interests, attitudes toward the host and home countries, knowledge and skills they gained from SAPs, and motivation for participation in SAPs. Astin’s (1977) I-E-O (input-environment-outcome) model served as the conceptual framework for this study. The following research questions were developed to guide this study:

1. To what extent do students change in terms of global perspective, attitudes toward cultural diversity, and self-efficacy after they participated in SAPs?
2. To what extent do students change their career interests and educational aspirations as a result of participating in SAPs?
3. To what extent do students change their attitudes toward host and home countries as a result of participating in SAPs?
4. What kinds of perceived knowledge and skills do students gain from studying abroad?
5. What motivates students to participate in SAPs?

Methods and Data Collection

This study utilized qualitative research methods. Data were collected via interviews (one on one and focus groups). The sample consisted of 18 out of 21 students who went to one of the following three SAPs in Czech Republic, Mexico, or Swaziland during summer 1999 while attending the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences at The
Ohio State University. The duration of the SAPs was one academic quarter. Focus group and individual interviews with the study abroad students were conducted in Fall 1999. Qualitative data obtained from interviews were analyzed using inductive data analysis which includes two essential sub-processes: coding and categorizing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Frequently mentioned categories were summarized into different themes. The major ways of establishing trustworthiness in this study were “member check” and “thick description” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results and Conclusions

Students in the sample were all undergraduates with an average age of 22. Most of them were from rural Ohio and never had any overseas experiences prior to SAPs. Most students were identified as white Caucasians. The findings were organized by the following research questions:

Research Question #1: To what extent do students change in terms of global perspective, attitudes toward cultural diversity, and self-efficacy after they participated in SAPs?

Students were asked to report changes in their global perspective, attitudes toward cultural diversity, and self-efficacy after participating in SAPs. Several themes were found. For global perspective, students felt more connected with the world and the people in other countries. Participants became more interested in international issues and more aware of what’s going on in the world. They especially paid more attention to the global economy and how it is going to affect the United States and themselves. These findings can be reflected in the following comments from interviews:

“I feel more connected with the world and the people in the world. The world is not that big. We are part of the world. I am more connected with the world, the other part of the world.” (Interview #2)

“I traveled enough through some of the central part of Europe. When I open up the Columbus Dispatch now, there are things happening around the world. When I read, I am like: wow! I was there! Or when I watch TV, they will show something about the world... you feel you know the history behind it, you know you were there. Just the world is not as big now!” (Interview #2)

“The global economy is changing between Canada, Mexico and the United States. Everything is going to be the same price. They even talk about American dollars being the major currency through Mexico, the United States and Canada. There are some people think about it but there are other people don’t. They don’t understand how the global economy is changing. They don’t understand that they are going to be hurting. Now I am more aware of how it also affects us. I realized that everything becomes more and more globalized!” (Interview #1)

Interviews showed that the study abroad experience had a positive impact on students’ attitudes toward cultural diversity. Participants became more aware of and open to cultural differences. Students indicated that the world is a place with different cultures and people,
and individuals should open their minds to understand, accept and appreciate the differences. A number of students commented about this realization:

“It really opened my eyes. I used to… I got annoyed by other cultures before. I had a sort of selfish attitude that everybody tries to become like Americans. That is the way should be. But going over (there)…it is kind of opened my eyes. There is a world of different cultures there. In a lot of ways, we should become more like them. A lot of ways we are going to need to be learning from them!” (Interview #1)

“I definitely have a greater understanding of humanity, no longer looking at say foreigners as different or not humanity. Not that I did that before, I just had a better understanding that even though we have different cultures, there are still a lot of similarities. Just like we have different types of cars, we still have cars, we have different types of food, but we still eat breakfast, lunch and dinner, things like that. I think just made me a kind of appreciate that country (Czech).” (Interview #7)

For self-efficacy, a majority 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 with others. The results were drawn from the following comments:

“Well, I have to say that being able to get from Prague to Berlin or Prague to Vienna by yourself not having to find some translator to be able to do it for you. Just being able to move around these countries without having to have somebody there with you, really was a big confidence builder! You can do it, you can do anything. How dare we complain about exam next week we got to take! We can go out to do that, the exam is a piece of cake now! That is the kind of way I view it. I look at as that: there is nothing here, there is not a challenge since I have come back home that I can’t deal with. I became a little more optimistic on a lot of things. Things like we show dairy cattle at home at our county fairs, things like that. I got all the disappointment if we did not win these cattle shows. Well, it is a little bit different now because you tend to realize that winning isn’t everything. Just being able to live with it! Have good cattle not the best cattle is important!” (Interview #8)

“Raised my confidence! I guess just the fact that I was in a different country and came back safely. Being a student teacher, like today I related so many things kids were talking about to the Czech Republic. Just something you have some experience that helped you to build your confidence. When you talk to somebody, you can say that I have been the Czech Republic. If somebody says: ‘wow! You did? That was really cool. I wish I would have your opportunity to do that!’ That builds your confidence, makes you feel good you went, makes you feel good you can go on to share your experience and ideas with other people! I had the opportunity to go over there. There are not very many people around my area or around where I am dealing with now in high school. Some even have never been out of the state. So if you have been to a different country, it really grabs their attention, makes them realize what you are doing. I… Just catch people’s attention!” (Interview #5)
Research Question #2: To what extent do students change their career interests and educational aspirations as a result of participating in SAPs?

Students were asked to report three of their occupational preferences and the highest level of education they aspired to attain prior and after SAPs. Results were then compared. It was found that students’ educational aspirations did not change. It was noted that there were some internationally related work interests evident for SAP participants after they came back from SAPs. Four students reported that they would like to work for international business or the United Nations after graduation.

Research Question #3: To what extent do students change their attitudes toward host and home countries as a result of participating in SAPs?

Most students did not know much or held some misconceptions about their host country before they went to SAPs. The study abroad experience changed their views about the host countries in a favorable way. They gained appreciation, respect and understanding of their host country and culture. One example is as follows:

“About the Czech Republic, I really did not know too much about it before I went. I guess when I thought about the Czech Republic, I thought about Czechoslovakia, I always thought of dark, gray, gloomy country. But really it was so beautiful, pretty, so many things to see and do. So it really improves my outlook for Czech Republicans and my feelings for the Czech Republic. Just really surprised me how different it was comparing to what I thought what was going to be!” (Interview #5)

The experiences also provided students opportunities to understand themselves and the United States through other people’s perspectives. Going to a less developed country let them gain a better appreciation of their lives in the United States. This finding is illustrated by the following comments:

“I realized to see the excess of the American life. I have my own car and I can go to buy clothes I want. Everything that makes America is just seems so excessive after I came home. Just realized how lucky it is to live in somewhere I can do anything and get anything I want. Just the excesses and the way we live. When you go to the grocery store, it has 20 isles. When you go to the grocery store in Czech, they had five!” (Interview #2)

“Well, the biggest change of views about the U.S. is I appreciate what we have here more than what I did before I went. We complained about tax, we complained about how bad unemployment is, things like that. You know, after seeing that country (Czech), we are not all that bad at all as what I originally thought we were.” (Interview #8)
Students paid more attention to U.S. international policies and relationships with other countries. They realized that the United States has the power to influence other countries. In general, students were more critical about U.S. international policies:

“I did see how America puts politics on a lot of things. I think a lot of people like Czechs and countries ask for help. We get involved and we want to take over, we want to stay and we will say if you want help, you have to be like this. That is what they were saying: helping us and then controlling us.” (Interview #2)

“I learned about the U.S. is that they put politics before people and culture. They won’t help Swaziland because of the government. Everyone is dying of AIDS over there. Just because they have a king that U.S. turned back on. He is not a cruel king, just has many wives. He is just a sexist. Because of the political system there, the U.S. won’t fund them for anything!” (Interview #2)

**Research Question #4:** What kinds of perceived knowledge and skills do students gain from studying abroad?

Students gained knowledge and different perspectives about history, World War II and different cultures. SAPs provided students the opportunity to learn history from a different view:

“It was interesting to listen to their history. We had history class over there. Really interesting to listen to their history from their perspective. From what we taught in elementary school, or even here at the Ohio State, we were trying to help after World War II, try to help (them) rebuild their economy. And I was in the impression that communism just kind of took over the Czech Republic. But I found it was voted in by the people…I think that was the most interesting class I had the whole time with the history classes….It was also interesting for me to listen from different perspective about World War II, everybody’s sights and views from different countries! ” (Interview #3)

“I gained a lot of knowledge from the fact that I now understand what it’s like over there. Because a lot of people say: well, European Union was the one causes hard time for the farmers and everything. We are unable to export all this. When you get there, you realized that they are battling back and forth with European Union as we are trying to. I realized that a lot of people over there are handling the same problems as we are!” (Interview #4)

Gaining traveling and survival skills was another important theme which emerged from the interviews. The experience helped students develop skills on traveling, taking care of themselves, non-verbal communication and survival skills without family and friends, without the security and comforts to which they were accustomed:

“The biggest thing I gained was understanding how to travel basically, how to plan details. To know what kind of things to take care, what sorts of advance preparations
need to be made. Just how to look out for myself and others over traveling. Learned a lot about just how to deal with being away from my life here in the U.S. Being gone for seven weeks, really was very tough to deal with not being around by my friends, not being able to get up and go to my favorite spots on campus any time I want, or to go to my favorite restaurants or something. Really learned how to survive not having things I take for granted everyday!” (Interview #7)

“I learned using non-verbal communication. Because I didn’t speak many languages over there. So many different languages there. We got on trips and went to a country which none of us could speak their language. But still we can communicate. So I learned a lot about using non-verbal language!” (Interview #1)

Some students commented that the experience helped them develop a sense of responsibility:

“We are ambassadors for the school, ambassadors for the U.S., ambassadors for ourselves, you know. But some students did not realize that you need to be responsible for the ways you act because you are from America, you are American, if you act that way, they will think all Americans act that way!” (Interview #9)

Research Question #5: What motivates students to participate in SAPs?

SAP students expressed different deciding factors that motivated them to study abroad. One of the most cited factors was students’ interest in the SAP host country. For example:

“Since high school, I wanted to study in Mexico. But I never had the opportunity (in high school). Then I thought, after I came to The Ohio State University, access (of the program) was not a problem, so this could be my chance to go. So I looked to it and decided to go!” (Interview #6)

Wanting to experience a new culture, timing, and reasonable cost were also typical factors that motivated students to participate in SAPs:

“I wanted to participate in study abroad because I thought it was a good opportunity to see another part of the world, to experience another culture. And the travel expense of study abroad is relatively inexpensive. It was a good opportunity. Go some other times in my life maybe not get to do as much. I had the time too!” (Interview #2)

Another important factor that influenced students’ decision of going to SAPs was former SAP students:

“I have known a guy who went on (study abroad) a couple of years ago. He said how a good experience it was and how fun it was to go on it. Sounds like an interesting time. Like I said I was studying and did not do much traveling or done something like that. So I thought if I could come up with money, it would be a good opportunity for me!” (Interview #3)
In conclusion, students’ global perspective was enhanced by the SAPs. SAPs contributed to students’ development of intercultural sensitivity in which participants were more aware of and open to cultural diversity. The experience provided new challenges to participants and assisted them in becoming more confident. Students developed some international career interests from SAPs. Study abroad participants were also likely to develop favorable attitudes toward their host country accompanied by some criticism toward the United States. Students gained new knowledge and skills from the experience. Personal interests, peer influence, desire to experience something different and cost were important factors in motivating students to participate in SAPs.

**Educational Importance**

This research has implications on understanding outcomes of SAPs in higher education, especially in colleges of agriculture. Students considered their international experience as a powerful educational program to enhance their personal growth and development. SAPs in colleges of agriculture need to be strengthened. It is recommended that general education programs include study abroad experiences. Preparation prior to study abroad is vital for students to be more aware of and expect differences in their host countries. Former study abroad students should be used as valuable resources to recruit and market the SAPs with special attention given to recruit more minority students. Strong commitment from administration and faculty members is important for fostering the SAPs in colleges of agriculture.

**References**


