A Student's Perspective on Enhancing a Study Abroad Program

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Abstract

There are many experiences throughout life that help people grow. One of those experiences is study abroad. It encourages students to step outside their comfort zones and open new horizons. A study abroad encourages students to become worldlier and enables them to incorporate their newly acquired knowledge into their everyday lives and careers. When a student is encouraged to study abroad, it is vital for the educator guiding them to be very knowledgeable about the program and to help the student prepare themselves. Well-informed faculty members can help students have a better experience.

The following suggestions are based on the experiences of the lead author, who studied at the University of Queensland as a part of a study abroad experience from Texas A&M University during the Fall 2006 semester. A detailed journal was kept during the experience and a content analysis of the journal was used to develop these suggestions. A journal is a great way to record the personal experiences and reflections throughout the time abroad and to document problems encountered. Documenting these experiences can provide a point of reference for future students who may wish to study abroad. One student’s experience can also help encourage future students to see the value in a study abroad program.

Interpersonal connections are important. When living in a different country, communication with local people is vital to the experience. Networking is an incredible tool that can lead to job opportunities and recommendations. The great variety of people that one can meet will all add something different to the student’s experience. It behooves the student to have an open mind and seek out as many relationships as possible.

Have a plan, but be flexible. A study abroad is not meant to be a steel structure that cannot be altered. It should be a skeletal structure to which the student can add the rest. Although a program might be somewhat structured, there may be unexpected occurrences. As a traveler, having flexibility is vital. When expectations are set, one needs to be aware that things may not always work out as hoped. Since the study abroad is an educational experience, the student will continue to learn as they face challenges that arise. How the student reacts to these challenges will either encourage or hinder their ability to adapt in a variety of settings. A study abroad can teach the student many different skills that can be applied in a variety of areas in their lives.
Immersion in the culture is important. As a visitor to another country, it is important to be somewhat familiar with the cultures present before embarking on that journey. Further, once the student has arrived, submersing themselves into the culture is the best way to learn, appreciate, and experience the true culture. A study abroad experience is what the student makes of it.

In summary, a student going to study abroad may need a fair amount of guidance and mentoring from faculty, who have the responsibility to be as informed as possible. Based on the experiences of one student, educators should convey to future study aboard students the following suggestions. Interpersonal connections are important. Have a plan, but be flexible. Immersion in the culture is important. With all of the above in mind, a faculty member can ensure that the student is as prepared as possible before the trip and has the best experience possible.

**Keywords:** study abroad; guidance; experience; mentoring; intrapersonal connection; culture