

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
Study Abroad Curriculum Integration

International Education for Undergraduates

2001-2002 Focus Group Executive Summary

I. Study Characteristics

The Study Abroad Curriculum Integration team held two series of focus groups during the 2001-2002 academic year, with a total of 26 students, both those who have and have not studied abroad. The goal of these sessions was to gain a better understanding of how students think and feel about studying abroad, to determine what they have heard and learned about and from studying abroad, and to understand better how they see studying abroad fitting into their undergraduate educational experiences.

What we heard, in general, should not be surprising at the beginning of a multiple year initiative such as Study Abroad Curriculum Integration. For the most part, the notion of curriculum integration is simply not on our students' radar screens. When past study abroad students were asked how they have integrated what they learned while studying abroad since they've returned to campus, the response, in general, was a room full of blank stares.

Studying abroad? Integration?

But when we dug deeper, we found that students are already integrating many aspects of their study abroad experiences and that many of them are applying what they had learned while abroad to their coursework at the University. In reality, there is a continuum of Curriculum Integration that exists at the University of Minnesota, from those students who apply newly-developed study skills to their coursework at the University to those who write senior papers directly related to their study abroad experience.

While students may not use the terminology associated with Study Abroad Curriculum Integration, they oftentimes are involved in the process. What complicates this involvement, however, is a lack of understanding of what Curriculum Integration means, preconceived notions about the role and value of studying abroad that are seldom academic in nature, and a mistrust of any institutionalization of Study Abroad Curriculum Integration. Below are brief explanations of these barriers (if that word can be used in this context) to Study Abroad Curriculum Integration.

II. The Experience

As one student said, "it was the experience, not so much the academics, that influenced me so much." Many of the students who had studied abroad, and almost all of those we spoke with who had not yet studied abroad, spoke about the experience, the cultural immersion, the opportunity to travel and to meet new people as the ultimate goal of studying abroad. This "experience" was not always clearly defined and more often than not, attempts at definition were full of ambiguity.

It was more a sense that the students had; a reflection back upon their time while studying abroad or an expectation and a hope for a possible future.

This is one of the major challenges and obstacles to Study Abroad Curriculum Integration. **How do we legitimize this extremely important experiential component while stressing the academic and curricular importance of studying abroad?** How do we push our students to think about what they are learning in the classroom and how that can be integrated into their undergraduate education without diminishing what they learn outside of the classroom as well? And what is the role of faculty and advisers in this process? The student's reactions to this last question were probably the most interesting responses we received during the sessions.

III. Resistance to Integration

"I don't think it's the professor's role to try and get you, to force you to discuss . . . what happened in your life outside . . . when you went over there. I think the fact that it's a completely independent journey that you're taking . . . the fact that you went over there and you did that on your own, (that) it makes their input into the situation unnecessary."

While this viewpoint may seem a bit extreme, many students who studied abroad held similar opinions. The key phrases in this quote, "outside," "on your own," help to contextualize many students' feelings about studying abroad. Studying abroad, to many students, is a sacred individual experience about which they are justifiably proud and consequently of which they are protective. There is a concern, audible in many students' comments, that the University would only spoil that experience, and students expressed clear concerns about the notion of curriculum integration of studying abroad in this context.

This of course should not be surprising as students' primary expectation is experiential rather than academic in nature. And as the experience of studying abroad, for many, is fundamentally transformational, it is also private and something not to be tampered with or spoiled by institutional meddling.

IV. Advising Culture

And yet, if we are to ensure the success of Study Abroad Curriculum Integration, this is where we must do the most work. Students are unprepared or unwilling to integrate what they learned while studying abroad because they did not think about how studying abroad would "fit" into their undergraduate education before they left. They worry about the transfer of course credits, being able to study abroad and still graduate in four years, but not about the content of the courses and about what they would actually learn in them.

"When you look into (studying abroad) . . . (place) is the only thing that people tell you about."

Academics are a secondary concern, if even that high in a hierarchical ranking of concerns of those who have chosen to study abroad. Classes are chosen after place is determined, and fit is only piecemeal to fulfill credits or ensure timely graduation. When students who had not studied abroad were asked to jot down the first three things that came to mind when they thought of the

words study abroad, only one wrote down “expanded educational opportunities.” The most common responses were cost, travel, cultural exploration, and academic fit (in the sense of credits transferring).

As a University, we need to help students begin to think about the academic benefits of studying abroad. We need to move them from place to content, to ensure that they are benefiting from the classroom opportunities as much as the cultural ones. In addition, in order for students to integrate what they learn while studying abroad, they must begin thinking about doing so even before they leave. Integration must be part of the advising process while they are overseas and when they return. For students to fully benefit from the academic advantages of studying abroad, they must be provided a context in which the notion of integration is pervasive, a reality, and an expectation.

V. Conclusion

This has been a very brief overview of what we have heard from our students about their thoughts and feelings regarding study abroad. Again, while some of this may seem daunting, the responses that we received should not be surprising given that we are at the beginning of a multiple year initiative. The results of the individual focus groups summaries are available from the Global Campus. Focus groups will be repeated annually to track changes in opinion and to inform the overall process.

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