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Assessing the Impact of Short-Term Study Abroad

Susan S. Carley
R. Keith Tudor

Abstract

Participation in short-term study abroad programs has dramatically increased in recent years. Little empirical research exists on learning outcomes associated with short-duration study tours, however. This study examines the impact of a study tour on the perceptions of American college students following a 2-week tour of Mexico. Based on measures of pre- and posttrip perceptions of the host country, students were found to have significantly changed following a brief overseas stay. Pretrip perceptions were also compared with the perceptions of a control group of students who did not participate in study abroad to determine the influence self-selection bias might have on initial perceptions. Analyses revealed significant differences in the perceptions of the two groups, but no significant difference between the pretrip and control groups' perceptions of the host country.

International educators have long recognized the impact of study abroad on student participants along many dimensions such as academic achievement, personal development, greater cultural appreciation, and enhanced global awareness. In light of these educational benefits, in recent years educational groups have called for an increase in study abroad programs and a reduction in the various impediments that prevent the vast majority of students from participating (Lane, 2003). Efforts at increasing student participation appear to be bearing fruit, as evidenced by rising interest in overseas study and growing diversity in destinations.
and lengths of study abroad programs offered by institutions of higher learning (Dennis, 2004; Marklein, 2003; McMurtrie, 2005).

Increasing popularity of study abroad has fueled a growing interest in knowing more about what students actually learn from their experiences. While there are numerous anecdotal accounts from participating faculty and study abroad administrators regarding the educational benefits of overseas study, observers often cite a lack of sufficient evidence to convince skeptics (Rubin & Sutton, 2001; Sideli, 2001; Vande Berg, 2001). According to one study, 95% of colleges assess student satisfaction following participation, but few measure gains in academic achievement, personal development, or intercultural skills as outcomes of study abroad (Sideli). As pointed out by its proponents, if study abroad is to be fully recognized and promoted as an invaluable part of a student's education, then more research evidence is needed to document learning outcomes among student participants.

A review of the research literature found limited information to document the impact of study abroad. This is consistent with the observations of others who note that research in this area is increasing but still relatively undeveloped (Rubin & Sutton, 2001; Sideli, 2001; Vande Berg 2001). While challenging some long-held assumptions about best practices (Hulstrand, 2006a), existing studies report a positive impact on students participating in semester or yearlong programs abroad (e.g., Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Carsello & Creaser, 1976; Hadis, 2005; McCabe, 1994). Observers note that more evidence is needed, however, if overseas experiences are to become a more accepted and integral part of higher education (Hulstrand; Rubin & Sutton).

While studies on the impact of longer sojourns suggest positive student gains, less is known about the extent to which students benefit from short-term programs. These programs vary from a week to roughly a summer in length. Because of their affordability and "convenience," programs of shorter duration are increasingly popular alternatives among U.S. students and colleges (Hofius, 2004; McMurtrie, 2005). The American Council on Education has also encouraged shorter stints as a way of accommodating students who would otherwise not be able to participate (Lane, 2003). Because of the brevity of these programs, however, questions inevitably arise about their educational value, and whether students really learn much from such minimal international exposure.

The purpose of this paper is to empirically assess some of the learning outcomes resulting from short-term study abroad. To determine its effectiveness and impact on participating students, we examine American students' perspectives prior to and shortly after participation in a two-week study trip to Mexico. For control purposes, their perspectives are compared to those of a similar student group that did not participate. The study fills some of the gaps that presently...
exist regarding what students gain from short-term study abroad experiences. The research may also be beneficial to international programs managers and study abroad faculty seeking alternative and improved ways of measuring what students learn from study abroad.

**Review of the Literature**

Assessing student gains is not a simple process, given the multifaceted nature of the study abroad experience. As a result, consensus has been lacking in how and what to measure (Sell, 1983; Sideli, 2001). Benefits can be immediate or long-term; gains can be measured in terms of academic achievement, career impact, attitudinal change, or personal growth. Outcomes may be viewed broadly (for instance, impact on global awareness) or in more specific terms (such as improved language proficiency). Institutions might examine learning outcomes for the purpose of improving course materials and student assignments used in specific programs or for determining which trip destinations or durations are most conducive to international learning. In light of these different ways of viewing how students change as a result of overseas study, it is hardly surprising that professionals in the field of international education have differed in how they measure the impact of study abroad and consequently sought guidance on the assessment process (Sideli).

Most of the research on study abroad outcomes has dealt with students who participated in longer overseas stays, rather than those of only a few weeks duration. These studies have tended to focus on broader changes in personal development and world-mindedness, outcomes which are more likely to result from extended, rather than shorter, periods of cross-cultural exposure. The majority find measurable gains in cross-cultural skills and global understanding resulting from study abroad.

As an example, using self-report data from American college students in Europe, Carsello and Creaser (1976) found students returned home with broadened horizons and more interest in art, architecture, foreign language, history, and meeting strangers. Carlson and Widaman (1988) learned that students came away from study abroad with greater "world-mindedness" than their non-study abroad counterparts. In a qualitative before-and-after study, McCabe (1994) also found that students' global perspectives changed during the time spent abroad. Kitsansas's (2004) examination of the role of students' study abroad learning goals confirmed that all students gained in cross-cultural skills, although goals mediated the impact of the overseas experience. Other studies have discovered a similar positive impact in terms of cross-cultural skills and global outlook (e.g., Carlson, Bum, Useem, & Yachimowicz, 1991; Drews, Myer,
Evidence has also been found confirming gains in second language acquisition for students who study abroad in non-English speaking countries (e.g., Brecht & Robinson, 1993; Parr, 1988; Rivers, 1998). These aforementioned studies dealt with students who had traveled abroad for longer periods of time, generally a semester to a year. Longer exposure to other cultures and languages and more time away from one's home country are likely to have a stronger impact than shorter stays. If student travelers are limited to only a few weeks overseas, do they experience positive learning outcomes? Are short-term programs worth their while, and are colleges and universities correct in pursuing them as viable alternatives?

**Short-Term Study Abroad**

An increase in the number and popularity of short-term study abroad programs is a significant trend in higher education today (Hulstrand, 2006b). NAFSA's (The Association of International Educators) *Guide to Short-Term Programs Abroad* describes these programs as faculty directed visits of 1 to 8 weeks generally sponsored by a home institution or consortium (Hulstrand). A recent directory of short-term programs includes over 2,900 student tours of 2 weeks or less offered by U.S. and foreign universities and other organizations (IIEPassport, 2005). These programs reportedly account for a significant part of the dramatic increase in foreign study participation among U.S. college students over the past decade (Hulstrand).

With the mushrooming of short-term programs, some schools are finding that demand outpaces administrative resources and the ability to monitor their “academic and intercultural quality,” according to a recent article in the *International Educator* (Hulstrand, 2006b, p. 49). Assessment of student learning is therefore an important challenge facing international programs administrators and study abroad faculty (Gillespie, 2002; Gillespie, Braskamp, & Braskamp, 1999).

Although some studies have been published on methods of teaching short-term programs for maximum educational benefit (e.g., DeLoach, Saliba, Smith, & Tiemann, 2003; Guerrero, 2005), a review of the academic literature shows a scarcity in the number and scope of empirical studies on student learning outcomes in shorter term tours. Those few studies that have been conducted will now be addressed to identify some of the gaps that exist.

Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005a; 2005b) surveyed students who had participated at some point over the past 6 years in a recurring environmental and cultural conservation educational tour to Costa Rica. The 2-week study abroad program was part of a semester-long course taught on the home campus, so students had opportunities to learn prior to the actual overseas visit. The authors
concluded that the short-term program had outcomes for students similar to those of longer programs. These included taking more courses outside of their major after returning to campus, subsequently traveling or studying abroad (almost half did so), increased interest in interdisciplinary studies, and showing changed perceptions of the positive versus negative outcomes of globalization. A possible shortcoming of the study is the lack of a control group and the fact that all students were exposed to a semester of academic preparation prior to travel. These limitations make it difficult to determine the degree of change attributable to class versus out-of-country experience.

Black and Duhon (2005) assessed the impact of a London-based summer study abroad program, comparing beginning and end-of-program measures to determine change. Using a cross-cultural adaptability inventory, they learned that business students gained in cultural awareness and personal development as a result of participation. These outcomes were consistent with the program's intended educational outcomes, thus affirming the effectiveness of the summer program, according to the authors.

Business students were also the focus of Peppas's (2005) exploratory study of the impact of short-term study abroad. His research involved nontraditional students who had participated at some point between 1997 and 2004 in a 2-week recurring program to Europe. Rather than looking at the immediate effects of study abroad, he asked these past participants to retrospectively reflect on the value of the experience with the passing of time. Participants rated the learning experience as more effective than conventional classroom courses for all business learning outcomes examined. Interestingly, almost all of the students reported direct job- and/or career-related impacts, either through increased knowledge, better intercultural skills, or the ability to feel more at ease when working with people from different cultural backgrounds.

These few studies are helpful additions to our understanding of the outcomes of short-duration study tours. However, more empirically grounded research is needed to address the merit of short-term study tours and the impact they have on students. Studies utilizing control groups would also be valuable to better assess the effects of the overseas experience on students. Is there really an educational benefit? Does a short study tour alter students' perceptions and attitudes? Is the time spent abroad sufficient to develop greater cross-cultural awareness? As a step in the direction of learning more about short-term study tours, the exploratory study discussed herein will address the following research objectives:

1. To determine whether study abroad students' initial perceptions differed from those of a control group who did not participate in the study abroad tour. The control group is used so we can better gauge whether perceptual
differences are due to the impact of the study tour or to a self-selection factor among those students who elected to study abroad.

2. To learn whether students’ pre- and posttrip perceptions regarding the host country changed following participation in a short-term study abroad program.

3. To examine whether program-specific learning objectives were met following a short-term study abroad experience.

Background of the Study Abroad Program

The short-term study abroad program examined in this investigation was sponsored by the marketing department in a college of business at a state-affiliated, midsize university located in a metropolitan area of the Southeastern United States. The travel portion of the program involved a 13-day, multiple-destination trip to Mexico that took place between spring and summer semesters of 2006. The program offered 6 hours of business credit to the 41 upper-division undergraduate students who participated, and it consisted of two courses: Doing Business in Mexico and Mexican Retail Practices, one of which was taught by the lead author of this paper. Four preparatory class meetings were held during the spring semester, and students were responsible for outside readings and several written assignments prior to departure. A debriefing meeting was held 2 weeks after returning home. A majority of the student contact time (and learning portion of the program) occurred in Mexico.

While traveling in Mexico, students attended a number of presentations conducted by government officials and executives from Mexican industry. Cultural excursions to museums, archaeological and historical sites, and local markets were included in the program. In addition, students were required to keep a written journal of their learning experiences, as well as individually complete observational assignments; during the latter, participants visited and wrote comparative reports on retail establishments in the United States (visited prior to traveling) and Mexico. Some free time was built into the schedule during which students were encouraged to explore the sights and culture of the areas in which they stayed.

Learning Objectives of the Study Tour

There were specific learning objectives associated with this business-oriented study tour, some of which were meant to be reflective of what students would learn in a traditional international business classroom. One objective was to have students gain a better understanding of the environmental forces affecting
how business and marketing are conducted in an international setting (in this instance, Mexico). Because international business managers must learn to recognize and adapt to differences in culture, aesthetics, levels of technology, economic development, political and legal systems, geography, and infrastructure, it was important that the study tour expose students to these aspects of Mexico as a country. Company visits, managerial presentations, cultural and scenic excursions, and course projects and assignments played an important role in meeting these learning objectives.

Another intent of the study tour was to encourage students to examine any preconceptions they might have about Mexico using first-hand impressions gained during the trip. Past studies have found that people tend to employ national stereotypes in forming evaluations of other countries and nationalities, and that these stereotypes are influenced by degree of contact (Amir, 1969; Stephan, 1985), as well as perceived variability from one's own social group (Linville, Salovey, & Fischer, 1986). These stereotypes have even been found to spill over to consumers' assessments of products made in a specific country (Klein, 2002; Olsen & Olsson, 2003). Research suggests that these country-specific stereotypes and attitudes change, sometimes even for the worse, as a result of a study abroad experience (Drews, Meyer, & Peregrine, 1996; Santinelli, 1994; Stangor, Jonas, Stroebe, & Hewstone, 1996). Therefore, it was expected that students would experience some kind of change in their perceptions of the host country as a result of the travel experience.

Methodology

Respondents

The 41 undergraduate study abroad students were enrolled at the sponsoring institution where they were studying marketing or some other business-related field. They ranged from 22 to 48 years of age, reflective of the university that they attend which has traditionally been considered a commuter campus of somewhat older, working students. Thirteen were male, whereas the remaining 29 were female. Most students had limited knowledge of Spanish, and only 3 were Spanish fluent. All but 2 of the participants reported that this trip was their first travel experience in Mexico.

The control group consisted of a convenience sample of 79 undergraduate business students enrolled in one of two sections of the principles of marketing class. The control students were upper-classmen at a similar stage in their completed coursework as the study abroad group. Control group respondents had not participated in any previous sessions of this recurring business-
oriented study abroad trip. This sample was selected based on its perceived comparability to the study tour group.

**Administration of the Research Instruments**

The study abroad students completed both pre- and posttrip assessments on campus, the former at the first of several pretrip study abroad class meetings held during the spring semester of 2006 and the latter shortly after returning from the study tour (summer 2006). Two of the students did not complete the posttrip measure due to absence, so their questionnaires were not included in any of the analyses. The 79 control group respondents did the assessments once only during a regularly scheduled class meeting in the summer of 2006.

**Research Instruments**

The learning impact of the study tour was assessed by comparing pre- and posttrip perceptions to determine whether change had occurred. Perceptions of the host country were measured in two ways, one quantitative and the other qualitative. The quantitative measure was a series of 15 semantic differential scales developed to assess the students’ pre- and posttrip perceptions of Mexico. In the scale development process, the relevant dimensions were selected to capture the key environmental forces taught in an international business classroom and used by international business managers in evaluating countries (and discussed above): These included infrastructural, economic, geographic, technological, political/legal, social, and cultural aspects of the environment. Learning experiences incorporated into the study tour centered on student exposure to these environmental factors.

A set of bipolar adjectives was then developed to reflect the environmental dimensions identified above as important to the student learning experience. Students were asked to respond to each adjective pair on a 1-to-7 rating scale based on the degree to which they felt a given term described Mexico. Descriptive terms were chosen to capture perceptions of sociocultural traits (e.g., friendly/unfriendly), economics and infrastructure (e.g., rich/poor), sociopolitical status (e.g., powerful/powerless), technology (e.g., complex/simple) and geography and aesthetics (e.g., scenic/drab). (See Table 1 for specific scale items.)

The qualitative measure was an open-ended question where respondents were asked to describe what came to mind, top-of-mind fashion, when they thought about Mexico and Mexicans. As previously mentioned, the control group responded only once, whereas the study abroad group provided both pre- and posttrip responses. A particular effort was made to assure the latter group...
that their responses would not affect their grades in the courses, and that no attempt would be made to trace individual comments to individual respondents. To ensure confidentiality, the study abroad respondents provided a private, self-selected code as a means of identifying their own responses at a later time. During the debriefing meeting, their earlier individual comments were returned, and they were asked to reflectively respond on whether and how their perceptions had changed over time. These open-ended responses were later reviewed and compared with students' pretrip responses.

Results

Semantic Differential Ratings

One of our study objectives was to determine whether study abroad students' initial perceptions differed from those of a control group who did not participate in the study abroad tour. A control group was used to learn more about the influence of self-selection on tour participants' initial views. It seemed plausible that students who elected to study abroad might have (a) more positive perceptions of the destination country or (b) more of a global outlook to begin with, and thus be more likely to change during study abroad as a result of this predisposition.

The semantic differential items developed to measure the student perceptions of Mexico are presented in Table 1 along with average group scores on each item. These 15 items were tested to determine their internal consistency or reliability in order to determine the appropriateness of their use in a summated scale. The most widely used measure to determine reliability is Cronbach's alpha. The fifteen items employed in this study achieved a .797 for Cronbach's alpha which exceeds the generally accepted lower limit of .70.

Table 1. Pretrip, Posttrip, and Control Group Semantic Differential Scale Means (and Standard Deviations)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semantic Differential Scales</th>
<th>Control (n = 79)</th>
<th>Pretrip (n = 39)</th>
<th>Posttrip (n = 39)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modern/Traditional</td>
<td>5.20 (1.10)</td>
<td>5.46 (1.02)</td>
<td>4.84 (1.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretty/Ugly</td>
<td>3.53 (1.36)</td>
<td>3.26 (1.16)</td>
<td>2.78 (1.32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich/Poor</td>
<td>5.35 (1.20)</td>
<td>5.38 (1.25)</td>
<td>4.84 (1.21)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Table 1 (continued).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semantic Differential Scales</th>
<th>Control (n = 79)</th>
<th>Pretrip (n = 39)</th>
<th>Posttrip (n = 39)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Important/Unimportant</td>
<td>3.41 (1.52)</td>
<td>3.13 (1.45)</td>
<td>2.81 (1.37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vibrant/Dull</td>
<td>3.31 (1.42)</td>
<td>2.69 (1.28)</td>
<td>2.59 (1.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly/Unfriendly</td>
<td>3.29 (1.27)</td>
<td>2.82 (1.30)</td>
<td>2.30 (1.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean/Dirty</td>
<td>5.11 (1.12)</td>
<td>4.82 (1.39)</td>
<td>4.86 (1.65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminine/Masculine</td>
<td>4.67 (1.08)</td>
<td>4.82 (1.12)</td>
<td>4.70 (1.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Neighbor /Bad Neighbor</td>
<td>3.93 (1.39)</td>
<td>3.49 (1.37)</td>
<td>3.03 (1.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban/Rural</td>
<td>4.53 (1.35)</td>
<td>4.33 (1.38)</td>
<td>4.19 (1.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenic/Drab</td>
<td>3.29 (1.33)</td>
<td>3.18 (1.25)</td>
<td>2.38 (1.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthy/Unhealthy</td>
<td>4.81 (1.33)</td>
<td>4.59 (1.14)</td>
<td>4.35 (1.42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex/Simple</td>
<td>4.53 (1.37)</td>
<td>4.57 (1.60)</td>
<td>3.97 (1.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powerful/Powerless</td>
<td>4.76 (1.12)</td>
<td>4.33 (1.24)</td>
<td>3.86 (1.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmonic/Discordant</td>
<td>3.97 (1.16)</td>
<td>3.54 (1.12)</td>
<td>3.32 (1.20)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Cronbach's Alpha = .797

**Note:** Measured on a 1 to 7 scale with 1 representing the first adjective and 7 representing the second adjective. Three items were reversed scored to compute the Alpha: Ugly/Pretty; Powerless/Powerful; and Discordant/Harmonic.

The perceptions of Mexico held by the three groups of students, pretrip, control and posttrip, were then subjected to an ANOVA test to determine if there were any differences among the groups. Scheffe tests were also conducted as a follow-up procedure to determine precisely where the differences actually occurred. The results of these tests can be seen in Tables 2 and 3.
Table 2. ANOVA Results for Pretrip, Posttrip and Control groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Differences</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>8.501</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.251</td>
<td>9.574</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>63.491</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>.444</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>71.993</td>
<td>145</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Results for Scheffe Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean Scores</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lower Bound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre trip</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.054</td>
<td>-.19256</td>
<td>.13393</td>
<td>.358</td>
<td>-.5239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.247</td>
<td>.39853(*)</td>
<td>.15390</td>
<td>.038</td>
<td>.0179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posttrip</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.656</td>
<td>.19256</td>
<td>.13393</td>
<td>.358</td>
<td>-.1387</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Control     |                 |            |      |             |             |
| 4.247       | .59109(*)       | .13510     | .000 | .2569       | .9253       |
| Posttrip    |                 |            |      |             |             |
| 3.656       | -.39853(*)      | .15390     | .038 | -.7792      | -.0179      |
| Control     |                 |            |      |             |             |
| 4.247       | -.59109(*)      | .13510     | .000 | -.9253      | -.2569      |

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

The ANOVA test was found to be significant (p=.000) indicating that there was a difference of perception among the three student groups. The Scheffe tests indicated there was no difference of perception concerning Mexico between the control group and pretrip group (p=.358). There was a significant difference in perception, however, between the control and posttrip groups (p=.000), as well as the pre- and the posttrip groups (p=.038).

The quantitative analyses of this study reveal two findings. First, the semantic differential scale that was developed to measure perceptions of Mexico was found to have internal consistency with a relatively good Cronbach's alpha of .797.
Given the internal consistency of the scale, other researchers may want to use it or a similar scale to measure perceptions of other countries.

Second, we found no significant difference of perception between the control group of students and the pretrip students but did find a significant difference between the pretrip and posttrip students' views. This seems to indicate the changes in perception between the pretrip and posttrip students may have occurred due to their study abroad experience.

**Qualitative Assessments**

The open-ended descriptions were analyzed and compared to determine respondents' views of Mexicans and Mexico. Frequencies of the most common terms and descriptions were noted. Perceptions of the control and pretrip respondents overlapped in terms of frequent mentions of Mexican food (and beverage), hard work, and common occupational traits of Mexicans, such as "construction worker." Responses from the control group exhibited more variation across subjects, ranging from very positive to highly negative. The descriptions they used for Mexicans and Mexico were somewhat more negative on the whole than the pretrip descriptions of the study abroad students. The most prevalent phrases or terms used by the control group were "blue-collar/day laborers/construction workers" (32%), "illegals" (31%), "Spanish speaking/no English" (28%), "Mexican food" (25%), and "hard working" (25%). The other more common responses included "friendly/nice/polite" (10%), "family oriented" (5%), "car pools/vans" (5%), "dirty/uncivilized" (5%), and "stare at/hassle women" (4%).

The study abroad students’ pre- and posttrip perceptions were evaluated to determine whether change had occurred. Their posttravel comments reveal a richer, more complex view of the country they visited and the people they encountered. Consistent with some of the learning objectives of the program, their time abroad led them to see Mexico as more commercially developed and sophisticated than they expected. One of the most frequent pretrip impressions (25% of all study abroad respondents mentioned this) was of Mexicans as construction workers and "people who jump into your truck at gas stations," as stated by one student. Their stay in Mexico and their exposure to the business and commercial side of Mexican life seemed to change this view among many of the students, leading them to see the country as more economically developed and socially diverse than they originally envisioned. "(They) work in business just like in the U.S.,” said one student. "A lot of the Mexicans are not as poor as I thought they would be. They dressed a lot better and were more professional,” said another. Other respondents volunteered: “Although mail appears to be a
huge inefficiency, the rest of the country is very functional. I would consider moving to Mexico to study and learn more, especially language skills," and "My views have completely changed! I recognize the significance and potential that Mexico has as a country."

Students were also surprised by differences in their expectations versus actual experiences concerning the scenery and physical environment they encountered in Mexico. This is a change unlikely to occur without direct, personal exposure to a different locale. A representative sample of comments includes: "I was expecting Mexico to be much more dirty and uninviting," "I was wrong about Mexico being ugly. It is a very beautiful country with beautiful, intelligent people living there. The cities are modern, with beautiful buildings and condominiums," and "My overall impression of Mexico has changed a lot. Mexico is a beautiful country and it was not as dirty as I thought it was going to be."

Foreign study is generally thought to encourage cultural tolerance and increase cultural appreciation. Based on many student comments, the trip appeared to have some impact in this area. "I appreciate the culture more in Mexico. It's excellent for preparing students to become more responsible," said one student. "Their culture is a lot more polite and formal and people are very friendly to the tourists. There's more to Mexico than just tacos and salsa," said another. "My views have changed a lot. I have a lot more respect for the Mexican culture and have found there is a lot to Mexico other than their food. The people were very nice." The impact of study abroad was also evidenced in the following student perspective: "My view has changed because now I understand why the Mexicans in America live the way they live. Mexico, for the most part, is not as rich as the U.S., but it is a great nation. The biggest reason that there is conflict between Mexicans and Americans is misunderstanding. What people do not understand, they generally do not like. After being in Mexico, I like the Mexican people a lot more."

Among this group of students, popular stereotypes concerning Mexico appear to come from their encounters with Mexican cuisine and Mexican-American restaurants back home. When asked to give their impressions prior to the time spent abroad, almost half mentioned terms or phrases relating to food and drink. "Chips and salsa," "margaritas," "tacos," and "Mexican food" were common pretrip impressions that changed from the impact of the experience. As cited in some previous quotes, food references also appeared in their more positive statements regarding the impact of their trip and in their reflections that they had come to see Mexico as more than the home of "tacos and salsa." Interestingly, food was an area where many participants came away with less favorable impressions than they had prior to their visit: "I do not like the food in Mexico - but I love Mexican food in the U.S.,” "Their Mexican food is a lot different than the Mexican
food here. The margaritas are the same,” and “I thought the food would be better than it was” were frequent responses.

**Summary**

Based on the qualitative analysis, the study abroad group started out with a slight (though quantitatively insignificant) tendency towards more positive perceptions compared with the control group. This suggests that there may be some self-selection bias at work, leading students with more positive initial views of a country to be more likely to want to study and travel there.

Among the research findings, the most noteworthy differences were those found in the before- and after-trip views of the students, rather than between the control and study abroad groups. The 2-week study tour had a measurable impact on students’ perceptions of the host country and its people. Consistent with the course objectives, participants returned with a greater understanding of Mexico as a commercial power and Mexicans as a diverse, rather than homogeneous, group. In the process, they came to note that Mexicans as a population were not really that different from the “folks back home.” Some students also reported altered views of how Americans relate to Mexico and Mexican-U.S. relations. In addition, students grew in their appreciation for Mexico’s cultural heritage and scenic beauty. These specific outcomes are in keeping with the broader goals of study abroad to create greater global awareness and appreciation, whether the overseas experience is short or long in duration.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

Our findings suggest that students undergo change in their views and perceptions as a consequence of participating in even a 2-week-long study abroad experience, and that these programs can have an important impact on international learning. Given the little empirical research that has been published on this issue to guide international programs administrators and study abroad faculty, these findings are reassuring and a positive early step in exploring the impact of short-duration programs. Additionally, they should be beneficial to parents of college students and students themselves who are concerned with the educational value of the more accessible short-term programs versus other options for international learning.

Shorter programs appear to fill a niche, particularly among students who would not be able to participate if these programs did not exist. For the novice traveler in particular, they can have any number of educational and behavioral outcomes. Students who participated in this short-term program, for example, came away...
with a better understanding of the Mexican economy and Mexican consumers. Arguably, they learned more from two weeks of first-hand observation than they would have in a 15-week course on their home campus. These are clear educational benefits that will help them as future business leaders in a global economy.

Short-term trips can have positive behavioral outcomes as well. Having gained a little international travel experience, students tend to grow in their confidence and ability to travel independently. The authors' decade-long experience with 2-week study tours indicates that tour participants embark on more international travel after the experience. Some return to the host country, bringing friends or family along with them, while others venture out to new destinations after their initial overseas stay. Study abroad "alumni" enroll in foreign language classes or other internationally oriented courses. All of these are behavioral outcomes anecdotaly reported by past participants to the study abroad instructors usually within a year or two of participating in previous programs.

Study abroad for even a short period can influence stereotypes and misconceptions students may have about other nationalities. For instance, many of our respondents began the program with impressions of Mexicans based largely on limited U.S. encounters at restaurants, convenience stores, and construction sites; these superficial encounters were important sources of their limited knowledge of Mexico and Mexicans. After the study abroad trip, the students had more developed, complex impressions and a recognition that Mexicans are more socially and economically diverse than they anticipated. One respondent reported discussing these newly formed impressions with friends and family who were surprised at what the student had observed while in Mexico. This suggests that students who study abroad for even a short time can shape the perceptions of others. Perceptual changes such as these are significant steps in the direction of international learning and global understanding.

Recommendations for Future Research

Our findings have several implications for future research. An important question emerged about the role of existing attitudes in determining who chooses to participate in study abroad. When assessing the impact of study abroad, preexisting attitudes and self-selection bias are clear considerations. Future studies that examine relative change in individuals, in addition to group or intergroup change, may therefore be warranted. Control groups should also be used when possible in judging the impact of study abroad.

The possibility of a self-selection factor has institutional implications as well. As noted by Kim and Goldstein (2005), if the rate of participation in study abroad is to increase, administrators will need to address intercultural attitudes
and biases that predispose some students against educational study tours. If study abroad primarily attracts students who are already inclined toward a more global worldview, then to some extent, colleges may be “preaching to the choir” in current approaches to encouraging participation in study abroad. The challenge for the future is how to achieve impact among those students with unfavorable intercultural attitudes who consequently are not interested in study abroad.

This study assessed the impact of study abroad based on measures developed around a set of specific learning objectives (i.e., greater appreciation of environmental forces on international business) as opposed to a more global approach. The authors believed that this was more appropriate given the dynamics of the learning environment. Previous research has often looked at impact from the perspective of broad attitudinal changes, such as in global awareness and world-mindedness, or changes in personal development, as in better cross-cultural skills. These are desirable consequences of an overseas study experience and central to the goals of international learning, but these kinds of measures are perhaps better suited to long-term study tours. A 2-week overseas sojourn may start the less worldly student down the road to a more global outlook and cross-cultural understanding, but its immediate impact may not “register” if global measures alone are used. If studies find that global measures fail to detect change, it doesn’t necessarily follow that short-term stays have no educational value. Future research on the impact of shorter programs may, therefore, want to examine student outcomes based on both specific learning objectives which will vary from one program to another and more global measures of international learning.

Limitations of the Study

This investigation dealt with the impact of study abroad on student participants whose views significantly changed after travel abroad. We can only conclude that these changes coincided with travel but cannot conclusively determine that the international trip caused the change to occur. It seems reasonable that the impact was real, but other explanations such as maturation, “demand characteristics” of the measurement process (i.e., knowing what the teacher wants you to say), or exposure to pretrip information on Mexico may have contributed to the changes. Intervening events such as recent media coverage of border and immigration issues may have also influenced the changes in students’ perceptions.

Another limitation of the study concerns the extent to which we can generalize to study abroad programs as a whole. Our conclusions on the impact of the trip are based on the responses of 39 students. Although the sample size was inherently limited due to the number of students who participated in this particular program, a different sample size might have rendered different results.
Our research instrument did not include any questions about prior international experiences in countries other than Mexico, so it wasn’t possible to control for this. Students who had previously traveled outside of the United States might have interpreted or responded differently to what they encountered while in Mexico, and this might have heightened or even diminished the impact of the time spent in Mexico.

A final caveat concerns the possible long-term effects of a 2-week study tour. Our measurements were taken shortly after the trip abroad, and we found a good deal of change in students’ views and perceptions. Is this impact permanent, however? If short-term study abroad becomes an accepted route for promoting global learning, then a better understanding is required of its impact over the long haul. Only longitudinal research can address the question of whether short-term stays lead to long-term change.

References


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