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Motivations, representations, and coloniality: Academic mobility from the United States to Latin America

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Abstract

This article addresses the decline in the number of U.S. students participating in study abroad programs in Latin America (particularly in Argentina) as reflected in recent statistics. It also explores the possible causes of this decline and argues that the current geopolitical context and biased narratives originating from a hegemonic global North influence existing representations of the region and, ultimately, students' motivations for preferring Europe as an academic destination. To this end, it employs a mixed-methods approach and applies concepts developed by Mignolo (2010, 2011, 2018), Mignolo and Walsh (2018), Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2011), Quijano (2000), and Conrad (2016). The article concludes that these factors negatively impact the choice of Latin America as an academic destination, and that, while it is possible to implement specific strategies at the local or regional level to improve this situation, as long as no decolonial alternatives to the Western paradigm are found, the global problem of how Latin America is perceived through the lens of this paradigm will persist.

Abstract in Spanish

Este artículo aborda, según estadísticas recientes, el descenso del número de estudiantes estadounidenses en programas de study abroad en América Latina (en particular en Argentina). Asimismo, indaga en las posibles causas de este descenso y argumenta que el contexto geopolítico actual y las narrativas sesgadas originadas en un norte global hegemónico influyen en las representaciones existentes sobre la región, y eventualmente en las

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motivaciones de los estudiantes para preferir Europa como destino académico. Para ello, se sirve de un enfoque de métodos mixtos y aplica los conceptos desarrollados por Mignolo (2010, 2011, 2018), Mignolo y Walsh (2018), Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2011), Quijano (2000) y Conrad (2016). El artículo concluye que estas causas inciden negativamente en la elección de América Latina como destino académico y que, si bien es posible implementar estrategias puntuales a nivel local o regional para mejorar esta situación, mientras no se encuentren alternativas decoloniales al paradigma occidental, el problema global de cómo se percibe América Latina a través de la lente de este paradigma persistirá.

Keywords

Argentina; coloniality; Eurocentrism; Europe; Latin America; motivations; representations; study abroad; United States

Editorial note

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the number of college students from the United States participating in *study abroad* programs in Latin America (and particularly in Argentina) has been declining. In contrast, Europe continues to be a preferred destination for this same group (Institute of International Education, 2024a-d; 2025).

This article analyzes the causes of this shift from a critical perspective, positing that this trend is largely a consequence of geopolitical narratives and sociocultural representations rooted in the symbolic construction of knowledge. These narratives and representations permeate the academic sphere and influence students' motivations and choices by legitimizing certain regions of the world (for example, Western Europe) as desirable academic destinations, to the detriment of others such as Latin America, which from this perspective are viewed as peripheral, unstable, or less prestigious. We argue that this dynamic reflects a persistent “coloniality of knowledge” (Mignolo 2010, 2011, 2018, 2021), which not only structures the international system of higher education but also permeates the imaginaries of all involved actors—parents, students, student advisors, and the general public—in various ways. In turn, these ways manifest as push and pull factors that determine the selection or rejection of potential academic destinations.

First, we will define the purpose and scope of this article and present statistics on the academic mobility of university and *college* students to Latin America in recent years, focusing specifically on short-term academic mobility rather than on international education aimed at obtaining a degree. This distinction is essential, as the dynamics, motivations, and determining factors of these two phenomena differ, and our analysis focuses specifically on short-term programs to Argentina, within the broader context of Latin America.

This article employs a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative analysis of recent statistics on academic mobility with a critical qualitative analysis grounded in theories of coloniality and Eurocentrism. In addition to statistical data and the specialized literature, it draws on the authors' experience, as they have directed programs for U.S. college students in Argentina for more than twenty years. This experience constitutes a valuable empirical source, as it provides firsthand insight into the motivations, perceptions, and challenges faced by students in contexts of academic mobility to Argentina and Latin America.

The corpus includes institutional outreach and marketing materials for *study abroad* programs from U.S. universities. Although the institutions are not identified for confidentiality reasons, these documents allow for an analysis of how cultural and geopolitical representations are constructed, which frame decisions regarding short-term mobility. We acknowledge that this approach has methodological limitations, as it does not incorporate direct interviews with students, but we believe it constitutes a significant empirical source for observing the imaginaries circulating in the field.

Next, we will review recent academic literature, which focuses largely either on the motivations for studying abroad or on how ideas of coloniality may influence students' attitudes once they are in the host country. In this article, however, we explore how these same ideas may influence, *a priori*, the (non)choice of an academic destination—an aspect not typically addressed in this literature.

Later, we will describe our theoretical framework: perspectives on the coloniality of knowledge and the paradigms that privilege Western Europe and North America (the global North), developed by Walter D. Mignolo (2010, 2011, 2018); Mignolo and Walsh (2018), Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2011), and Conrad (2016), among others. Secondarily, we will draw on the pull and push factors that influence the choice of an international academic destination, concepts developed by Mazzarol and Soutar (2022). We understand these concepts as an initial framework that is insufficient to explain the complexity of the phenomenon; therefore, we will complement it with other critical

perspectives. This theoretical framework as a whole will support our hypothesis regarding the causes of the decline in U.S. student mobility to Latin America and Argentina, at a time when neoliberalism and right-wing policies—evident not only in countries of the Global North but also in other regions—are producing both ideological and practical consequences in higher education and shaping the perceptions of the public involved, especially students. We define right-wing policies as those aimed at economic liberalization and the reduction of the state's role in the provision of services.

We will also note the limitations of this article's scope, and then propose possible practical strategies that, in the future, could help increase the academic mobility of students from the United States to Latin America and Argentina in particular. Finally, we will present our reflections by way of a conclusion.

2. Subject of analysis and methodology

This article analyzes the academic mobility of university and *college* students from the United States and their participation in *study abroad* programs in Europe and Latin America—especially in Argentina—based on statistics from recent decades, taking into account the profile of these students. The article covers both *study abroad* programs offered by local universities and those provided by independent organizations, as well as programs offered by universities based in the United States that provide their own programs in host countries.

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, as it integrates the quantitative analysis of statistical data (Institute of International Education, 2025; OECD, 2025) with a qualitative approach grounded in decolonial theoretical frameworks (Mignolo, 2018; Quijano, 2000; De Sousa Santos, 2011; Conrad, 2016). This methodological combination allows us not only to describe the numerical trends in academic mobility but also to interpret the narratives and representations that shape the choice of academic destinations. In this way, the article combines empirical evidence with critical reflection, offering a more comprehensive view of the motivations and perceptions that influence the preference for Europe over Latin America.

The student profile considered in this study is constructed using available demographic data, supplemented by institutional marketing materials and information on *study abroad* programs, as well as the authors' professional experience in managing mobility programs in Argentina. This combination allows us to examine both the sociodemographic characteristics and the cultural representations that influence short-term mobility.

3. What do the statistics tell us?

Global academic mobility has increased substantially over the past decade: according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), there were three million international students in OECD countries in 2014, while by 2022, the figure had exceeded four and a half million (OECD, 2025). In 2022, OECD member countries remained the primary destinations for tertiary students (OECD, 2025, p. 2). According to the same report, “Canada, France, Germany, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States received about two-thirds of all international students” (2025, p. 3), a trend that continues.

The United States, for its part, stands out as a host country rather than a sending country. The percentage of the college-age population studying abroad is relatively low compared to the number of students the country hosts annually: during the 2024–2025 academic year, the United States received 1,177,766 international students (IIE, 2025), while only 298,180 U.S. students studied abroad between 2023 and 2024 (IIE, 2025); in addition, another 120,000 participated in experiential or online global learning activities without earning credits, or chose to pursue a full academic degree in another country. Among those who pursued some form of study abroad, a marked preference for Europe can be observed.

Consistently, more than 50% of all outbound students from the United States have chosen Europe as their destination in recent decades. In the 2004–2005 academic year, 60.3% chose Europe, while in the 2023–2024 period, 64.1% did so. The peak occurred in the 2021–2022 academic year, at 73.1% (IIE, 2024c). When analyzing geographic preferences within Europe itself, Italy, the United Kingdom, Spain, and France lead the way: more than 45% of U.S. students going to Europe are concentrated in these countries, according to the Open Doors report (IIE, 2025). Italy, in particular, has experienced significant growth, reaching an all-time high of 45,067 students in 2023–2024 (IIE, 2025). Outside the European continent, the 2023–2024 period also saw growth in less traditional destinations such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia, which—in contrast to the decline in Latin America—have shown sustained growth over the past decade, establishing themselves as emerging destinations. This suggests that the decline in Latin America is not solely due to a global reduction in mobility, but rather to a redistribution toward other regions considered safer or more prestigious (Marginson, 2022).

As for the Latin America and Caribbean region, it has occasionally ranked second or third, but with a notably smaller share. The region accounted for 14.4% in the 2004–2005 academic year, reaching its peak in the 2015–2016

period at 16.3%. From that point on, a real decline in its share of students began to emerge (IIE, 2024a), even taking into account the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on global mobility. In the 2023–2024 period, the share fell to 10.5% (IIE, 2025).

Regarding Argentina, over the past two decades its ranking among the top destinations chosen by U.S. students has fluctuated, ranging from 10th to 24th place (IIE, 2024a). According to the report by the Institute of International Education (2024a), during the 2000–2001 academic year, Argentina ranked 17th with 1,258 students, representing 0.8% of the total 154,168 U.S. students who studied abroad. Argentina experienced a boom in the 2010–2011 academic year, when it reached 10th place with a record 4,589 students, or 1.7% of a total of 273,996 (IIE, 2024a). During the 2020–2021 academic year, Argentina closed its borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which is why it does not appear in the ranking. In the following cycle, 2021–2022, Argentina dropped to 23rd place: that year it received 1,041 students, 0.6% of the total, likely because the borders did not reopen until November 2021, which was too late in the Northern Hemisphere's academic calendar for enrollment in *study abroad* programs. Between 2022 and 2023, it ranked 20th (2,503 students, 0.9% of the total). The latest update (IIE, 2025) indicates that the number of U.S. students participating in studys in Argentina during the 2023–2024 period was 2,702, far below the all-time high set in 2010–2011; this places Argentina one spot higher than in the previous period but with the same percentage (0.9%).

As concerns the profile of U.S. students participating in *study abroad* programs, according to the IIE report (2024c), this has remained constant in recent years. About 67% identify as female, and 34% as students of color, which is consistent with the demographic proportion found in higher education in the United States. Among the most popular fields of study chosen by participants in study abroad programs are business, administration, and the social sciences, which together account for 38% of the total. Furthermore, the percentage of *undergraduate* students has also changed little, representing 89.6% of the total in the 2023–2024 academic year (IIE, 2025b).

There are differences, however, between the profiles of those studying in Europe and those who choose Latin America. Among the latter, there is greater diversity and a higher presence of African Americans, Latinos, and first-generation college students (IIE, 2024d). Many of them receive scholarships or state or federal financial aid, as they have fewer financial resources than their counterparts studying in Europe. On the other hand, students studying in Latin America tend to focus on the humanities, the social sciences, social justice, human rights, and linguistic and cultural immersion in Spanish; they also show a preference for alternative and community-based

experiences. Europe, in contrast, attracts a student profile more interested in programs offered in English that also facilitate their professional development in an international environment (IIE, 2024d).

According to Rizzotti and Gómez (2018), students arriving in Argentina come from a variety of U.S. universities and are, on average, twenty years old; furthermore, “for many, the stay in Buenos Aires represents their first trip outside their country of origin” (p. 175).

4. Literature review

The literature on the internationalization of higher education typically covers both long-term mobility (completing an entire university degree abroad) and short-term mobility (semesters, intensive programs lasting a few weeks, etc.). This study focuses on the latter, in dialogue with critical studies that examine market tensions and structural inequalities in *study abroad* programs (Altbach & Knight, 2007; de Wit, 2020; Marginson, 2022).

It is important to note that much of the literature addressing both academic mobility and the motivations of U.S. students in choosing where to study predates or immediately follows the COVID-19 pandemic. The global situation in the 21st century is changing rapidly, and academic mobility is subject to many factors; therefore, some concepts or perspectives may have been developed within a context quite different from the current one.

Although limited, there is literature that addresses mobility to Latin America. For example, Pedró and Chacón (2024) analyze two decades of student mobility in Latin America and the Caribbean, while Twombly et al. (2012) argue that student mobility to Latin America must be understood within the framework of a new global century.

4.1. Motivations and choice factors

Some of the literature explores the motivations for studying abroad or, once the decision has been made, for choosing an academic destination (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2022; Shkoler & Rabenu, 2023; Jon, 2024; Ovchinnikova et al., 2024; Haisley et al., 2021). Other articles, however, address the concepts of coloniality and Euro-American centrism in knowledge and in the field of higher education (by Euro-American centrism, we mean a perspective from the Global North that includes both Europe and North America, particularly the United States). Much of this literature is devoted to research conducted in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Australia, and, to a lesser extent, Africa, although there is relatively little research on Latin America (Marginson, 2022; Ogden, 2007; Siltaoja et al., 2018; Zhang, 2025). Finally, there are authors who analyze how

study abroad programs have become a commodity in the United States (Bolen, 2001; Smith, 2025).

Among those who focus on student motivations are Mazzarol and Soutar (2022), whose article is based on research conducted with international students from Indonesia, Taiwan, China, and India that were in Australia. Mazzarol and Soutar attribute these motivations to what they call “push and pull factors” that drive students to study abroad (p. 82). Push factors relate to the students’ country of origin and may be personal or linked to the national context itself; in contrast, pull factors have to do with the host country. Regarding the latter, they mention, among other factors: students’ knowledge of the host country; the lack of access to higher education in their own country; recommendations they receive from family, friends, or other stakeholders; geographical proximity in terms of time and space; and “perceptions regarding the academic environment” in the host country (p. 83). However, they do not explain how these perceptions are formed or address the ideological bias they may entail.

Shkoler and Rabenu (2023), for their part, build on the concepts of Mazzarol and Soutar and delve into what they call “determining factors,” which can be both internal and external (p. 25407). Among the internal factors, they mention knowledge of the destination country’s language and psychological factors; the external factors range from personal political leanings to recommendations. Shkoler and Rabenu (2023) go a step further by asserting that the fact that the two countries (the country of origin and the host country) maintain social, historical, and cultural ties may influence students’ choices. Jon (2024) explores the motivations of American students for choosing an academic destination. To do so, he uses Bourdieu’s (2004) concepts of cultural, social, academic, and linguistic capital. Students acquire these forms of capital at different stages of their lives: before college, during college, and once they are settled into the *study abroad* program itself. Jon (2024) argues that there is a close connection between the choice of an academic destination abroad and the different forms of capital accumulated by students during these stages.

Some articles, on the other hand, explore the role that knowledge of the spoken language in the host country can play in the choice of destination. Ovchinnikova et al. (2024), for example, conclude that students with an advanced level of proficiency in the language spoken in the host country are more likely to choose to study there than students with only an intermediate level of proficiency in that same language. For Ovchinnikova et al. (2024), knowledge of the host country’s official language is an important motivation—rather than the result—of the decision regarding where to study. Haisley et al.

(2021), in turn, analyze the motivations of international students who choose the United States as an academic destination, in contrast to those of U.S. students participating in *study abroad* programs. Among the former, the learning of the language emerges as a prominent motivation, in contrast to the latter, who choose to study abroad “to travel, as an escape, and for academic and social reasons” (p. 196). Haisley et al. (2021) suggest taking these factors into account when designing and marketing programs aimed at attracting U.S. students. Shkoler and Rabenu (2023) also argue that students’ language proficiency carries more weight than other factors and that it is “a crucial part of cultural adaptation” (p. 25409).

4.2. Coloniality and Eurocentrism

Other authors, in turn, have analyzed the links between academic mobility and Eurocentrism and coloniality. Zhang (2025) argues that the global higher education system still adheres to a Western-centric approach. Global rankings legitimize “large, research-oriented universities,” whose European model was adopted by the United States and has become the global standard (p. 1606). Marginson (2012) is particularly concerned about the low representation of Latin American universities in global rankings, which he attributes in part to reality—since he argues that science in Latin America is weak—but also to a monocultural and biased ideology, given that the ranking criteria of systems such as the Shanghai, Leiden, Scimago, and Times Higher Education rankings are limited to science. Furthermore, these rankings primarily include publications in English, favoring the Anglo-Saxon university model and ignoring certain indicators crucial to the region, such as the quality of teaching or social access.

Siltaoja et al. (2018), on the other hand, analyze the implications of the existence of international higher education campuses. International campuses are found in a limited number of countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, France, and Australia were at the forefront when the article was written) and are established in more than seventy countries, among which China, , the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Singapore, and Malaysia accounted for nearly 40% of the global total at that time. Siltaoja et al. (2018) argue that the discourse used to promote these international campuses as “world-class” is constructed as “an ideology and a fantasy” that serve to structure neocolonial relations (p. 75), based on a mimicry that translates into a form of control. However, given that colonizer-colonized relationships have become ambiguous in the neocolonial era, they argue that this mimicry could also eventually transform into an element of resistance against colonial authority (p. 79).

Ogden's (2007) article focuses primarily on students' experiences in the host country. Ogden argues that professionals in the United States who manage study abroad programs reinforce and perpetuate a colonial system, and promote "false perceptions of risk" that create barriers to the host culture and generate fear of the unknown (p. 47). Ogden defines contemporary American students as "colonial students" (p. 36), who approach the opportunity to study in another culture as a consumer good and choose tailor-made, generally ethnocentric programs that are also offered in English. These programs keep them within their comfort zone, allowing students to observe the less appealing aspects of the host culture from an imaginary colonial veranda and a safe distance (Ogden, 2007).

Along the same lines, Bolen (2001) and Smith (2025) analyze how vocabulary and imagery reflect a growing tendency to treat *study abroad* programs as a commodity or a "pre-packaged experience" (Smith, 2025, p. 90), characteristic of a capitalist society.

In summary, the existing literature analyzes both students' motivations for participating in academic programs abroad and the influence of the Western paradigm on the structuring of these programs and on students' experiences *on site*.

5. Theoretical framework

This article draws on concepts developed and analyzed by Conrad (2016), Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2011), Walter Mignolo (2010, 2011, 2018), and Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh (2018), among others, and focuses on the ideas of coloniality/decoloniality (and, intrinsically linked to these, that of Eurocentrism), which share the common aim of challenging the Western paradigm that has governed the world order since the advent of modernity in the 16th century and is characterized by an economy of accumulation: capitalism. In the last two centuries, this paradigm has also encompassed North America. What Mignolo (an Argentine semiotician and researcher) calls the "colonial matrix of power" (2018, p. 106) has since become dominant over all other non-Western or non-Christian paradigms of knowledge, ultimately becoming a product exported to the rest of the world under the banner of modernization and universality. This form of domination—Western imperialism—is the essence of what Mignolo (2018) terms "coloniality," drawing on concepts introduced by the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano (2000). This will allow us later to situate academic mobility in relation to historical structures of domination and representation.

The Western system of thought, argues Mignolo (2011), has given rise to both capitalism and communism. De Sousa Santos (2011), for his part, criticizes

the fact that capitalist society favors practices in which scientific knowledge prevails, since such knowledge is distributed unequally throughout the world. At the same time, he proposes an “r intercultural translation or diatopic hermeneutics” (p. 38) which, in general terms, implies that no culture is complete in and of itself, making dialogue and confrontation between cultures fundamental factors. Conrad (2016), on the other hand, analyzes Eurocentrism from a positionality-centered approach. He distinguishes two Eurocentric perspectives: one that regards Europe as the primary model, and the second, which he calls “conceptual Eurocentrism,” referring to “the projection of a particular set of concepts, values, and chronologies onto the past” (p. 168), which may be Eurocentric even if they do not refer exclusively to Europe. These concepts and narratives originating in Europe, Conrad argues, were used as “models for universal development in places such as Argentina [...],” for example (p. 169). For Conrad, writing from the global “South” does not refer to a “geographical or ethnic designation,” but rather to an epistemological position (p. 184).

The authors mentioned suggest different alternatives for overcoming this paradigm. To break free from the colonial matrix of power, Walter Dignolo proposes a “global, but not a universal one” (2010, p. 9) through “epistemic disobedience” (2018, p. 114) and “pluriversality” (2011, p. 52) in opposition to the Western system of thought. De Sousa Santos’s (2011) “epistemologies of the South,” for their part, imply a diverse understanding of the world that is not limited to the Western perspective (p. 35). Conrad (2016), in turn, explores the possibility of moving beyond Eurocentrism without running the risk of falling into other forms of centrism.

The notion of the “coloniality of power” proposed by Quijano (2000) and expanded upon by Dignolo (2021), then, offers a critical framework for understanding how the dynamics of university internationalization reproduce historical hierarchies between the Global North and the Global South. In this regard, explanatory models of internationalization—such as those by Altbach and Knight (2007) and the critical review by de Wit (2020)—tend to prioritize institutional and economic motivations, relegating the implications of power and inequality to the background. However, studies on *study abroad* programs, such as the analysis by Twombly et al. (2012), show that the experiences of U.S. students in Latin America are embedded in a web of colonial expectations and narratives of exoticization. At the same time, recent mobility data compiled by Pedró and Chacón (2024) show that, despite the region’s growth as a destination, patterns of asymmetry persist, reinforcing the need for a decolonial interpretation of these processes.

In the case of academic mobility, the coloniality of knowledge manifests itself in the implicit hierarchization of destinations. Europe and North America are presented as legitimate spaces for the production of knowledge, while Latin America is portrayed as peripheral, associated with political instability or a lack of academic prestige. This representation shapes students' motivations even before they consider the specific programs on offer (Mignolo, 2021; De Sousa Santos, 2011).

6. Hypothesis

In this article, we argue that there are three interdependent aspects that have not yet been sufficiently studied, and which act as the vertices of a single triangle: the decline in the flow of U.S. students to Latin America and Argentina in recent years; the motivations that lead these students to rule out this region as an academic destination; and the perceptions or representations that influence these motivations *a priori*.

We believe that the decline in the flow of students stems from various closely related causes, including global and local geopolitical factors; biased narratives that reinforce the hegemony of the global North and perpetuate the discourse of coloniality; and representations derived from these same narratives which, taken together, favor the choice of Europe as an academic destination, displacing Latin America. The current context is not only the framework within which policies are implemented and decisions are made at the local, institutional, national, and regional levels, but it also exhibits characteristics associated with coloniality and Western-centrism and, through both implicit and explicit discourse, on the perceptions and imaginaries of students, faculty, parents, international program offices, and other actors involved in higher education and academic mobility in the United States. This, in turn, results from the continuation of a power matrix that, since the advent of Modernity, has first elevated Europe—and later, by extension, the Global North—as universal models of knowledge.

7. The geopolitical context: Perpetuated coloniality

In recent years, right-wing governments and policies have resurged in various regions of the world, accompanied by a discourse that fosters xenophobia, fear, and mistrust of the Other, to the detriment of democratic values such as diversity and inclusion. There is a connection between this geopolitical situation and coloniality: as Mignolo and Walsh (2018) argue, “although the rhetoric and politics of right-wing nationalism, neoliberal

globalization, and progressive movements may differ, each continues to perpetuate and foster coloniality” (p. 6).

In the United States, Donald Trump’s return to the presidency has promoted a nationalist and conservative agenda (Benavides, 2025). In Europe, Giorgia Meloni has served as President of the Council of Ministers of Italy since 2022; Hungary’s former Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, is known for his ultra-conservative positions; Karol Nawrocki, supported by the Law and Justice Party (PiS), was recently elected president of Poland, and the Vox party has risen in the political landscape to become the third-largest political force in Spain (Hasselbach, 2025). In Latin America, notable examples include the election of Javier Milei as president of Argentina in 2023, with his radical liberal platform; the Bukele administration in El Salvador; and the victory of José Antonio Kast, the Republican Party candidate, in Chile’s 2025 presidential election, marking a political shift to the right in that country.

8. The decline of the languages and humanities in U.S. universities

One factor that must be taken into account is the decline of the humanities at U.S. universities in favor of *STEM* fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Mahto (2024) points out that “the number of college degrees awarded in the humanities is decreasing every year, with a drop of nearly 25% between 2012 and 2020,” a fact that, he asserts, is a direct consequence of capitalism, which places greater value on those fields that “directly dominate production and consumption” (para. 8).

The humanities and the study of languages are closely linked. Lusin et al. (2023) note that, with regard to enrollment in languages other than English (LOTE) at institutions of higher education, the 2021 census already showed an 18.0% decline in Spanish enrollment, a percentage similar to that of other Romance languages (p. 5). This was the first time since 1990 that enrollment in Spanish as a language other than English fell below half of total enrollment (p. 7).

Consequently, this trend is reflected in the fields of study chosen by students participating in *study abroad programs* (IIE, 2024c). In the 2000–2001 academic year, *STEM* fields accounted for only 16.6% of all students. Since then, the percentage has grown steadily, reaching 22.6% in the 2013–2014 academic year and rising to 27% overall in the 2022–2023 academic year. In comparison, enrollment in foreign languages—one of the historical reasons why many students chose a specific international destination—has declined. To cite just

one example, while it accounted for 7.8% of fields of study in the 2013–2014 period, between 2022 and 2023 it fell to just 5.7% (IIE, 2024c).

As a result, the decline in Spanish enrollment at U.S. universities limits the pool of students with an interest in Latin American languages. As proficiency in foreign languages declines, the preference for English-language programs in Europe is reinforced, which negatively impacts mobility to Argentina and other Spanish-speaking countries.

With regard to language and cultural policies at the governmental level, President Trump signed an executive order in March 2025 declaring English the country's official language. According to Torbisco Casals (2025), this decision aligns with the “English-only” movement, while also “undermining the cultural and linguistic diversity of the U.S.” Similarly, it reflects an ethnocentric perspective that privileges English over other languages. Furthermore, in April 2025, the Trump administration laid off 65% of the employees at the National Endowment for the Humanities and cut millions of dollars in grants—a move that Galinato (2025) views as a manifestation of a growing trend toward anti-intellectualism in the United States (para. 4).

What are the implications of these events? The “colonial students on the veranda” discussed by Ogden (2007) tend to choose destinations where English is the dominant language or, at the very least, a *lingua franca*, allowing them to remain in their comfort zone. The profile of the minority who choose to study in Latin America, as we have seen, includes those pursuing degrees in the humanities and/or Spanish. If, as Ovchinnikova et al. (2024) assert, knowledge of the target language is an important motivator when deciding on an academic destination, then the decline in enrollment in the humanities and/or Spanish will undoubtedly impact—as, in fact, according to statistics, it already is—the number of students participating in academic programs in Latin America and Argentina.

9. Imaginary and representations: Europe

Interest in the United States in cultural travel to Western Europe did not emerge until the early 19th century, at which point it became “a rite of passage into adulthood” for young people who were mostly white and from affluent backgrounds (Smith, 2025, p. 94). Smith attributes “the popularity of the Grand Tour among American elites” to an “increase in consumerism and the mass production of printed information during the first half of the nineteenth century” (p. 94). He also argues that the Grand Tour symbolized the status and prestige of those who undertook it. While the number of travelers in the early nineteenth century numbered only a few thousand, less than a century later it

had reached nearly thirty thousand, thanks in large part to the rise of the middle class (Smith, 2025).

On the other hand, at the beginning of the 20th century, there was an exponential increase in the number of students in higher education in the United States, mainly due to the expansion of the middle class and a favorable economic situation in the country (Smith, 2025). The founding of the Institute of International Education in 1919 was the next step that helped set the course for the implementation of academic internationalization in higher education. Interestingly, Smith notes that one of the first study-abroad programs for American students was launched in Argentina in 1939 (p. 97). Since then, the internationalization of higher education has become a “global industry” (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2022, p. 82).

Why, then, does Europe still represent an attractive academic destination for American students? On the one hand, we believe that the prestige that drew elites to the Grand Tour a century ago translates today into a halo effect that exploits the Eurocentric narrative of the Old Continent as the sole source of historical progress, change, and modernity (Conrad, 2016). On the other hand, this is combined with what Nye (2017) calls “soft power.” This is implemented through an effective *marketing* strategy and a lexicon that appeal not only to the representation of Europe as the historical cradle of civilization but also to a diversity of contemporary cultural objects in various fields such as media, literature, music, and advertising. Birindelli (2024), for example, analyzes the imagery that the city of Florence evokes in international students through some fifty autoethnographies. Based on this analysis, Birindelli concludes that, for students, Florence (and by extension, Italy) is closely linked to the “Made in Italy” brand: sophistication, fashion, and gastronomy (2024). As for architecture and art, these “stem from the grand Renaissance narrative” (p. 153). At the same time, Birindelli argues that, in the case of Italy, students choose it as a “vacation destination” that contributes to their “personal, cultural, and aesthetic growth” (p. 154).

The existence of European programs such as Erasmus Mundus, which celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 2024, also exerts an attraction on students through “soft power.” The program is defined as “a powerful catalyst for Europe’s global educational exchange and collaboration, driving personal growth and institutional excellence” (European Commission, 2024, p. 4). The document highlights “Europe’s appeal as a premier study destination” and boasts of offering “a unique appeal to prospective students, with its high academic standards, its unparalleled mobility opportunities, and its attractive financial aid” (p. 4).

Similar language can be found on many of the *websites* for *study abroad* programs at major U.S. universities. The *marketing* strategy for Europe focuses on prestige, academic rigor, and tangible benefits for one's resume, and alludes to elite cultural consumption (art, food, museums). The language emphasizes the iconic nature of the cities and the accessibility of the experience. It also highlights career-related aspects, such as gaining professional experience through internships. The ultimate promise is to enjoy the elite lifestyle and art in culturally rich destinations.

10. Imagery and representations: Latin America

Viewed from a European and North American-centric perspective, Latin America has always represented “the Other.” Despite its enormous cultural diversity and richness, the region as a whole is usually associated with Hollywood stereotypes. According to Cruz Feliciano (2018), Latin America is perceived as a whole in this way as “a markedly underdeveloped, macho, politically turbulent region, marked by heated tempers and exuberant nature” (p. 193). The mass media also do not contribute positively to this image, as they frequently treat the region as a uniform whole and exaggerate the events that occur there (p. 192). Lack of knowledge about the unfamiliar often generates concerns, and clear and adequate communication is necessary to manage the expectations and frustrations of all stakeholders involved in the field of *study abroad*. Cruz Feliciano (2018) argues that “much of the perception regarding the magnitude of dangers in Latin America stems from a lack of knowledge about the region and its political, cultural, and geographic diversity, to name a few areas” (p. 193). Another disadvantage is that, often, local governments are either unwilling or unable to invest in scholarships or programs (such as Erasmus, for example) that encourage U.S. students to participate in *study abroad* programs in Latin America.

The U.S. Department of State's interactive map provides up-to-date information on security conditions in each country and classifies alerts on an ascending scale from 1 to 4, where 1 advises taking normal precautions and 4 directly advises against travel (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, n.d.). Although many Latin American countries are listed at the same alert level—or even a lower one—than some European countries, this does not seem to have a more positive impact on the region's statistics. At the time of writing, for example, Argentina is listed in Category 1, as are Paraguay, Canada, and Portugal, while many Western European countries—such as England, Spain, France, and Italy—are in Category 2.

As for the language used on U.S. university *websites* to promote their *study abroad* programs in Latin America—particularly in Argentina—the

marketing focuses on “personal transformation” and “sociopolitical engagement.” In this case, the goal is integration to achieve cultural authenticity and to think and act globally. In other cases, the marketing appeals to similarities with Europe, such as on websites that describe Buenos Aires as “the Paris of South America”—a cliché and debatable expression, but one intended to make an impact on its target market. While Europe is promoted as a guaranteed professional and cultural springboard, Latin America is promoted as a vehicle for activism, deep linguistic immersion, and a critical understanding of global equity.

11. Practical implications

The persistence of hegemonic ideas of Modernity and the “universal” parameters by which knowledge is still defined today remain a difficult obstacle for Latin America to overcome, and they have practical implications that directly impact the academic mobility of U.S. students to the region.

This is evident in global university rankings, which shape the perceptions that those involved in the academic sphere tend to form of Latin American educational institutions. These rankings place the region’s institutions lower on the list because they prioritize Western standards such as research (Marginson, 2012), relegating other equally essential aspects to the background. Marginson argues that part of the strength of universities such as the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in Mexico and the University of Buenos Aires (UBA) in Argentina lies in the humanities, languages, and “most professional disciplines and the social sciences,” but this does not seem to be reflected in global rankings, nor is the quality of teaching or social inclusion considered important (2012).

For Marginson, “the English-language bias and the scientific bias are impossible to correct” (2012). This bias, which affects bibliometric rankings, also has direct consequences for *study abroad* programs. On the one hand, it is evident that students’ growing preference for science and mathematics puts the region at a disadvantage: in the specific case of Argentina, for example, the underfunding and cuts to CONICET salaries and jobs by Javier Milei’s government are jeopardizing the future of research (Aznarez, 2025). On the other hand, in order to attract more English-speaking students, countries would need to make a significant effort to offer academic programs in English, which would require additional public and private investment in resources, training, and infrastructure. This, however, would not be enough to compensate for the fact that during their academic stay, students must interact daily in a context of total linguistic immersion with the community: with host families, with their local peers, while getting around the city, in stores, etc.

Furthermore, this would affect their ability to participate in activities such as volunteer work, community service, or professional internships. In the field of volunteer work, even a basic knowledge of Spanish is often not sufficient to work with vulnerable communities; as for professional internships, in most cases an advanced level of the language is an essential requirement.

The decline in enrollment in humanities and foreign language programs in U.S. higher education suggests that, in the coming years, there could be an even greater decrease in the number of students choosing to study Latin America or Argentina. When combined with the drastic cuts and caps imposed by the Trump administration on student loans, as well as the stricter eligibility requirements for Pell Grants, the outlook becomes even more complex (Comercio TV, 2025). It is anticipated that “students will prioritize short-term or technical programs over more expensive graduate degrees, which could transform college enrollment starting in 2027” (Comercio TV, 2025, para. 7). A large proportion of students participating in programs in Latin America or Argentina require financial aid or scholarships to do so. Without these resources, their participation could be jeopardized.

Finally, we must not overlook factors such as fear of the Other, xenophobia, language policies that prioritize English over other languages, and heightened nationalism that promotes exclusion rather than inclusion. The stereotypes associated with Latin America within the Global South make it a region that is perceived as threatening and unstable, in contrast to Western Europe, which is held up as a place of prestige and civilization.

12. Limitations

The focus of this article is the way in which certain representations stemming from persistent coloniality act as push or pull factors influencing American students’ motivations for choosing an academic destination, and in particular, the contrast between two destinations—Latin America and Europe—as reflected in the statistics. In this regard, this article does not analyze the many other push or pull factors that are necessarily intertwined with those under consideration here and that have already been studied exhaustively in the literature on the subject.

Academic mobility itself is a complex issue involving a multitude of variables. On the one hand, there are subjective factors and individual circumstances, which, though not addressed in this article, are no less important. On the other hand, the global context today is volatile: circumstances such as natural disasters; epidemics or future pandemics; wars between nations or internal conflicts within a country that generate instability and danger: all of which can reverse a statistical trend overnight and alter the

course of events to favor one region or another as an academic destination, thereby setting aside or mitigating (even if only temporarily) negative perceptions of that region.

13. Discussion: Possible strategies to improve the situation

What, then, could be done in the short or medium term to reverse these statistical trends and increase the participation of U.S. students in Latin America— particularly in Argentina? It would be necessary to implement strategies at the local or regional level that would help attract this target audience and reinforce existing ones. These strategies should combine both public (by governments) and private (by companies or institutions) initiatives and investment, including expanding agreements with U.S. universities; the possibility of specific scholarships for students wishing to participate in programs in the region; infrastructure improvements; ongoing teacher training; an attractive and flexible academic offering that includes science and technology; and programs offered in English or as bilingual options—both in-person and hybrid—to reduce the language barrier. We believe that this is, of course, only possible in countries whose governments prioritize investment in a national education system that strives for excellence, and whose budgets allow for it.

However, while these strategies could serve as a palliative measure and help improve statistics, they would not be sufficient to completely dispel the representations, stereotypes, and preconceived notions inherent in the discourse of coloniality that influence the motivations of *study abroad* students. At the same time, Latin America would be forced to remain within the orbit of that same colonial power matrix, as it would have to meet the demands of consumers in the Global North.

14. Conclusions

This article examines the causes behind the decline in the number of U.S. students participating in *study abroad* programs in Latin America (and particularly in Argentina), as reflected in recent statistics. It also argues that the current geopolitical context and the biased narratives originating from a hegemonic Global North influence existing representations of the region and ultimately act as pull or push factors in students' motivations for preferring Europe over Latin America as an academic destination.

The article explores the ways in which Western Europe continues to capitalize, well into the 21st century, from the halo effect projected by

narratives rooted in Modernity to construct a discourse of academic tradition and solidity, as well as cultural and scientific prestige, through soft power strategies such as *marketing*, scholarship programs, and funding for international students—contemporary equivalents to the appeal of the “Grand Tour” of two centuries ago. In contrast, Latin America continues to be subject to representations that exclude it from the hegemonic paradigm of knowledge and place it at a disadvantage in the realm of academic mobility originating from the global North. As long as there are no practical decolonial alternatives to the Western paradigm, the question of how Latin America is perceived through the lens of this paradigm will persist—a problem that does not appear likely to be resolved in the short term.

In summary, although the theoretical frameworks of coloniality allow us to problematize the hierarchies implicit in academic mobility, the current reality shows that the countries of the so-called Global South must accommodate the demands of the Global North. As long as international mobility remains subject to market logic and as long as students continue to be viewed as customers by the relevant actors—universities, advisors, and *study abroad* offices—host institutions will have little chance of establishing their own rules without risking a loss of competitiveness. This scenario compels us to devise strategies that acknowledge structural limitations, while continuing to challenge the narratives that reinforce the centrality of the North.

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Ethical approval

This study is exempt from approval by the Institutional Ethics Committee

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are publicly available sources.

CRediT author statement

Beatriz Comte: conceptualization, writing of the original draft, review, and editing. **Carola Bracco:** writing of the original draft, review, and editing

Statement on AI use

The authors declare that they did not use any type of generative artificial intelligence for the writing of this manuscript.

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