

More Is Better: The Impact of Study Abroad Program Duration

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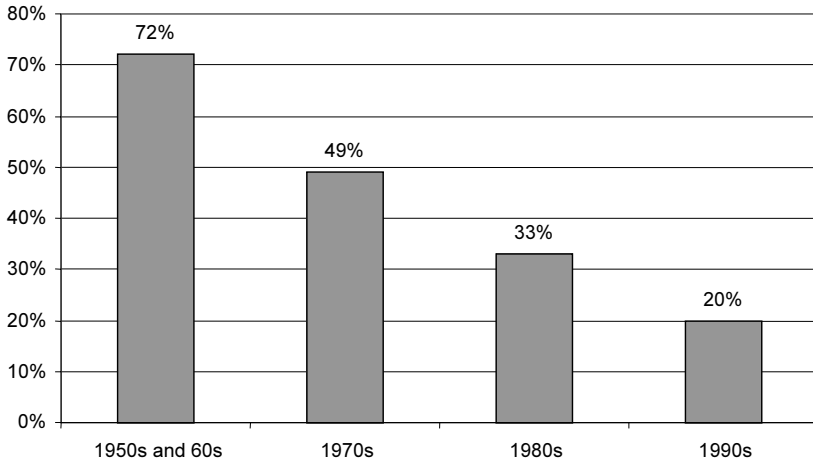
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I n t r o d u c t i o n

Conventional wisdom in the study abroad field has held that more is better; that is, the longer students study abroad the more significant the academic, cultural development and personal growth benefits that accrue. The standard assumption is that meaningful advancement in language learning and other academic disciplines using a culture-specific pedagogy requires at least a full year of study abroad.

During the past 16 years, due to a variety of academic, social, college policy and economic reasons, national study abroad enrollment trends have been moving toward significantly fewer students studying abroad for a full year. Although the aggregate number of students studying abroad has increased dramatically, a 232% increase from 1985-86 through 2001-02 (IIE, 2002), the data show a steady decline in the number of students studying abroad for a full academic year. In 1985-86, for example, 17.7 % of U.S. students studying abroad studied for a full year whereas in 2001-02 this percentage had declined to 7.8%. Moreover, these same data show that the largest enrollment growth since 1990 has occurred in programs that are less than one academic quarter in length, growing from 36% of the total study abroad enrollments in 1985-86 to 49% of such enrollments in 2001-02. Figure 1 illustrates the sharp decline in full-year enrollments in Institute for the International Education of Students (IES) programs across the decades, from 72% of those who studied with IES in the 1950s and 60s to only 20% in the 1990s.

Figure 1: Percentage of IES students studying abroad for full year, by decade



While the benefits of full-year study abroad are strongly embraced by study abroad professionals, there is a dearth of quantitative research supporting a correlation with positive outcomes. Resources are available which measure the number of students who study abroad by term lengths, most notably the Institute for International Education’s (IIE) *Open Doors*. Descriptive articles have been written about the benefits of studying for a full year over shorter term lengths. Numerous studies (i.e.: Barnhart & Groth, 1987; Carsello & Creaser, 1976; Flack, 1976; Hensley & Sell, 1979; Isabelli-Garcia, 2003; James, 1976; Kuh & Kauffman, 1985; Marion, 1980; McEvoy, 1986; Morgan, 1972, 1975; Pfnister, 1972; Salter & Tefer, 1975; Stauffer, 1973) investigate the effects of studying abroad on a variety of student values, academic competencies and interests. None of these studies attempted to measure longitudinal impact; most had relatively small sample sizes, and reported inconsistent findings. Also, sustainability of results was not addressed in these studies.

A search of the literature netted nine other empirical studies that correlated length of study with longitudinal outcome measures (Akande & Slawson, 2000; Biligmeier & Forman, 1975; Dwyer, 2004, 2004; Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Nash, 1976; Ruhter McMillan & Opem, 2004; Steinberg, 2002). Six of these nine studies were conducted by researchers at IES, who sampled from the same alumni population.

Study Design

This study, conducted by IES in late 2002, was designed to measure the longitudinal correlations between specific program features—language study, housing choice, duration of study, enrollment in foreign university courses, participation in an intern-

ship or field study, among others—and a variety of student outcomes. A 54-year-old, not-for-profit, academic consortium, IES regularly conducts formative and summative evaluations of its programs, surveying students both during and immediately after their study abroad experiences. This longitudinal study was undertaken with the intent of comparing end of academic term evaluation results with longitudinal results. Only through such a retrospective longitudinal study could the sustainability of results, the effects of program design, and the impact of shifts in student participation patterns be assessed.

For a variety of reasons, this study presents unique merits. First, the IES alumni pool provided an opportunity to draw upon 50 years of data. IES estimates that it has educated over 45,000 students. Second, the size of the pool of study abroad alumni to survey (17,000: available, current addresses) was much larger than most college or universities' study abroad enrollments during the same 50 year period. Third, the range of types of programs and locations was useful for statistical analyses and comparisons across educational models and cultures. Throughout the 50 years, IES has offered 25 programs located in 14 countries, in multiple academic study abroad models, from “island” programs to hybrid to direct enrollment and full immersion. Similarly, the housing arrangements for students represented the full spectrum of opportunities from dormitories to home stays to apartments.

The number of years of data, the number of different locations, the variety of academic models and housing arrangements used, and the size of the alumni pool allowed IES to isolate and assess the longitudinal impact of specific program components for large enough sample sizes to make the results statistically valid and reliable. Few other organizations have the sustained history of programming necessary to replicate these study features.

In 1997, IES established the IES Model Assessment Program (The IES MAP®), a set of guidelines for developing and assessing study abroad programs by using these categories: student learning environment, intercultural development, resources required for academic and student support, and program administration and development. The end of term student satisfaction survey, a 2000 pilot survey, as well as the 2002 survey for this study, were designed using the categories of the IES MAP®.

In 1999, a pilot study was conducted with a limited sampling of 10% (2100) of the IES alumni population (Akande & Slawson, 2000). This survey achieved a response rate of 44% (707 respondents), after factoring in the undeliverable surveys due to outdated addresses. There were many responses to a number of open-ended questions asking respondents to characterize the impact of study abroad on their lives. These data were used to expand and refine the questions used in the retrospective longitudinal 2002 survey.

The 2002 survey consisted of 28 questions, many of which had numerous sub-questions. The questions were divided into 3 types: basic demographics, impact of key study abroad elements, and impact of study abroad on select behaviors, attitudes and specific achievements. The survey results are reported across five areas: general findings, academic attainment, intercultural development, career impact and personal growth.

Within each category respondents answered between four and seven questions asking them to rate, on a 5-point Likert scale, the impact of their study abroad experience on a specific developmental measure. Several other questions asked respondents to provide information on specific behaviors since studying abroad, such as the frequency with which they used a foreign language, whether or not they had worked or volunteered in an international capacity since studying abroad, and the highest academic degree they had obtained.

The survey was sent to 17,000 alumni who studied with IES for varying term lengths between the academic years of 1950-51 and 1999-00. More recent alumni were not surveyed because less time had elapsed since their study abroad experience, making sustainability of impact difficult to assess.

An overall 25% response rate (3723 of the 14,800 alumni current addresses) was achieved. The 1980s and 90s produced large response rates of 40% and 41%, respectively. The survey was disseminated by U.S. mail only once because the response rate and the sample size were large enough to make generalizations. Conducting the study with an on-line survey would have been much less expensive and it would have allowed for repeated requests to be made more easily. However, it was assumed that using an electronic survey would have resulted in significantly lower response rates from the classes of alumni who studied abroad between 1950 and 1970.

A representative sample was produced by U.S. geographic regions, decade of participation in an IES study abroad program, and attendance across 25 IES programs located across 14 countries. Using statistical analyses, which take into account errors due to sampling, the confidence level of the results (the probability that the sample represents the population from which it was drawn) of the entire population of 14,800 alumni was determined to be 95%.

While the high response rate and the corresponding large sample size make the study particularly valuable, its methodology has limitations. Alumni satisfaction surveys use self-reported data that can only reveal correlations—not infer causation. As is the case of most surveys measuring the impact of higher education on individuals (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), there is no control group. It is difficult to attain a control group that is truly comparable with the experimental group because there are too many confounding variables during the college years (i.e., socio-economic levels, academic choices, maturation, etc.) and after (i.e., lack of

motivation to respond). The 14,800 alumni originated from over 500 U.S. colleges and universities. Likewise, the sampling method necessary to achieve a control group is very expensive and difficult to achieve at a statistically significant level. Even with these common limitations, the study offers a unique opportunity to measure the sustainability of study abroad outcomes.

Results and Discussion

The results are reported by term length during which respondents studied abroad with IES. During this 50-year period full-year programs were typically 32 weeks in length; semester programs were a minimum of 16 weeks long, and summer term programs ranged from six to seven weeks in duration. Of the total sample of 3723 respondents, 32% (1191 students) studied abroad with IES for a full year. Sixty-two percent (2308 students) of the sample studied with IES for a semester and 6% (224 students) studied for a summer term.

The results are reported across 5 areas: general findings, academic attainment, intercultural development, career impact and personal growth. All of the results reported are statistically significant at the .05 level, meaning that these results would occur by chance less than 5% of the time. Thus, we can state that we have 95% confidence that the results represent significant difference.

Table 1 illustrates that:

- Full-year students are much more likely to choose to live with host-country nationals. The two primary purposes for full-year students to study abroad are language acquisition and learning about another culture. This study suggests that they choose programs in which they can live with host-country nationals in order to better attain these goals. The fact that summer students are more likely than semester students to live with host-country nationals may suggest that they are hoping to achieve these same goals in a more intense manner. Some of these programs were offered in English-speaking countries where students were electing to live in residence halls with host country nationals presumably to learn more about the culture. However, at some English speaking locations the students lived with other U.S. students. Alternatively, these results could be an artifact of the housing options offered across the five decades.
- Full-year students may represent a self-selected group that has more interest in studying abroad to begin with, and the experience then serves to reinforce this commitment. Thus, 20% of full-year students studied abroad more than once. Perhaps they are more likely to be interested in studying foreign languages and improve their facility with one or more languages by studying abroad repeatedly.

- Table 1 indicates that full-year students (27%) were more likely than semester (22%) and summer term (10%) students to use the ability to study abroad as a criterion for choosing their undergraduate college. When the data were analyzed by decade of participation in an IES study abroad program, the study revealed that almost three times as many students in the 90s (28%) used the ability to study abroad as one criterion for choosing their undergraduate college in comparison with those in the 1950s and 60s (11%). This finding suggests that increasing numbers of students are thinking about studying abroad while they are in high school and that they consider study abroad an essential aspect of their college education.

Table 1: General findings by study abroad term length

SURVEY ITEM	FULL YEAR	FALL SEMESTER	SPRING SEMESTER	SUMMER TERM	TOTAL
Chose to live with host-country nationals	87%	67%	67%	73%	73%
Studied abroad again after IES	20%	14%	13%	17%	16%
Desire to study abroad influenced choice of college	27%	22%	22%	10%	23%

Table 2 details the impact of studying abroad on a variety of academic attainment measures by study abroad term length. The most striking results are:

- Full-year students were much more likely to enroll in foreign university courses while studying abroad. This may mean that the additional semester allows the student to acquire more confidence and language facility in order to succeed in a foreign university course. They may be more committed to learning the foreign language. Linked with the finding about full-year students attaining Ph.D. degrees in significantly larger numbers, it is feasible that more academically sophisticated, committed students are attracted to full-year study. Alternatively, their academic majors may encourage longer study duration.
- Full-year students appear to have increased confidence in their linguistic abilities due to length of exposure and amount of practice. They are much more likely to live with host-country nationals and slightly more likely to participate in an internship/field study or take a university course. With these multiple types of exposure to the culture and opportunities to improve their language facility, it follows that the full-year students would continue to use a foreign language regularly and be more committed to foreign language study. A unique finding is that summer term students increased their commitment to using a foreign language regularly more than semester length students.
- Full-year students were more inclined to change or expand their college major(s), increase their interest in academic study, be more influenced in

their subsequent educational experiences, and be slightly more likely to attend graduate school. The longer period of studying abroad may have provided them more time to engage in new areas of study and therefore had more impact on their future academic endeavors.

- Forty-six percent of full-year students reported acquiring graduate degrees. They were twice as likely to attain a Ph.D. degree (7%) than students attending shorter terms (3%).

Table 2: Academic attainment by study abroad term length

SURVEY ITEM	FULL YEAR	FALL SEMESTER	SPRING SEMESTER	SUMMER TERM	TOTAL
Took foreign university course	64%	43%	47%	51%	51%
Use a foreign language on a regular basis	44%	30%	31%	37%	35%
Studying abroad reinforced commitment to foreign language study	88%	83%	85%	90%	86%
Enrolled in an internship/field study course for credit	19%	17%	18%	8%	18%
Influenced decision to expand/change academic major(s)	72%	59%	57%	60%	63%
Enhanced interest in academic study	81%	80%	79%	84%	80%
Influenced subsequent educational experiences	91%	85%	86%	84%	87%
Influenced decision to attend graduate school	70%	60%	60%	65%	64%
Highest Degree Attained: BA	41%	52%	47%	46%	47%
MA (other than MBA)	28%	22%	27%	24%	26%
MBA	11%	10%	12%	11%	11%
Law Degree (JD)	9%	9%	9%	8%	9%
Medical degree (MD, DDS, DVM)	1%	2%	1%	4%	2%
Ph.D.	7%	3%	3%	3%	5%

Table 3 displays the intercultural competence outcomes reported by respondents by study abroad term length. The most significant findings include:

- Students who studied abroad for a full year were twice as likely to cultivate lifelong friendships with host-country nationals. Lasting relationships take time to develop.

- Numerous results in Table 3 support the idea that the cultural development aspect of the study abroad experience endures. A unique finding is that studying in one culture and language has led a significant number of respondents to learn more about another culture or learn another language.
- Achieving greater understanding of one’s own cultural values and biases, continuing to be influenced in one’s interactions with people from different cultures, and developing a more sophisticated way of looking at the world are all strong findings, particularly for those respondents who studied for a full year.
- On average, 90% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that study abroad influenced them to seek out a greater diversity of friends. This is a critical finding, and its distribution across all term lengths is noteworthy. This finding raises the question of whether the experience promotes greater racial, ethnic, and cultural tolerance, or whether the students who study abroad are *a priori* a self-selected, more tolerant group.

The student interest in participating in internships/field study has increased significantly in the past 5 decades. Of those respondents who studied with IES in the 1950s and 60s, 0.5% participated in internships/field study. During the 1990s the percentage of alumni respondents participating in internships/field study had increased to 51%. This finding may be confounded by IES placing less emphasis on experiential education as a program element in the 1950s and 60s versus the later

Table 3: Intercultural development outcomes by study abroad term length

SURVEY ITEM	FULL YEAR	FALL SEMESTER	SPRING SEMESTER	SUMMER TERM	TOTAL
Still in contact with host country nationals	29%	15%	14%	7%	18%
Since visited country studied in	61%	41%	48%	52%	50%
Helped me better understand own cultural values and biases	99%	97%	97%	95%	98%
Influenced me to seek out a greater diversity of friends	94%	88%	89%	86%	90%
Continues influencing my interactions with people from different cultures	97%	93%	92%	92%	94%
Opened up an interest/passion for learning about another culture or language	66%	58%	58%	62%	60%
Contributed to developing a more sophisticated way of looking at the world	85%	79%	82%	77%	82%

decades. The question is: Do internships/field study and studying abroad in general have any impact on career development?

Table 4 shows the impact alumni reported studying abroad had on career development by term length. The most important findings are that:

- Full-year students (57%) were more likely than those studying other term lengths to engage in international work or volunteer activities.
- Full-year students were much more likely to have pursued a career direction, still speak a language other than English regularly in the workplace, and acquire skill sets and professional contacts that influenced their career paths.
- Full-year students were more likely to work for a multi-national organization in the U.S. and to get a job overseas.
- Studying abroad was almost two to three times as likely to cause changes in career plans of full-year students than those studying for shorter term lengths.

Table 4: Career impact by study abroad term length

SURVEY ITEM	FULL YEAR	FALL SEMESTER	SPRING SEMESTER	SUMMER TERM	TOTAL
Engaged in international work/volunteerism since studying abroad	57%	42%	48%	38%	48%
Acquired skill sets that influenced career path	82%	73%	74%	71%	76%
Established relationships abroad that became professional contacts	7%	3%	5%	1%	5%
Ignited an interest in a career direction	70%	57%	59%	59%	62%
Enhanced abilities to speak a foreign language which they utilize in the workplace	72%	60%	61%	67%	65%
Influenced them to get a job overseas	21%	12%	17%	10%	17%
Influenced decision to work for a multi-national organization in the U.S	16%	12%	16%	9%	14%
Caused changes in career plans	18%	10%	10%	6%	12%

Table 5 illustrates alumni’s reporting of the dramatic impact of studying abroad on a wide variety of personal growth attributes.

- Full-year students were more likely to achieve these gains, but the impact is impressive regardless of term length. This is particularly the case in the areas of increased self-confidence, tolerance of ambiguity and maturation.
- Full-year students were somewhat more likely to have changed, refined and/or continue to be influenced in their political and social views due to studying abroad. Ninety-five percent of all respondents reported that studying abroad has had a lasting impact on how they view the world.
- Full-year students were more likely to have been influenced to continue their participation in community organizations, feel that studying abroad influenced the choices they made in their family lives and still be in contact with U.S. friends they met while studying abroad with IES.

Table 5: Personal growth by study abroad term length

SURVEY ITEM	FULL YEAR	FALL SEMESTER	SPRING SEMESTER	SUMMER TERM	TOTAL
Increased self-confidence	98%	95%	96%	97%	96%
Enabled me to tolerate ambiguity	92%	87%	88%	88%	89%
Served as a catalyst for increased maturity	98%	97%	97%	95%	97%
Caused me to change/refine political and social views	89%	84%	80%	76%	84%
Continues to influence political and social awareness	91%	86%	85%	86%	88%
Continues to influence participation in community organizations	71%	65%	62%	67%	66%
Continues to influence the choices made in family life	78%	72%	69%	70%	73%
Has had a lasting impact on world view	97%	95%	94%	92%	95%
Still in contact with U.S. friends met while studying abroad	63%	47%	50%	26%	52%

Conclusions

Long-held beliefs that studying abroad for a full year has more significant and enduring impact on students were supported by the data of this study. While it has been long believed that study abroad changes people's lives, little evidence exists to explain what kinds of tangible changes occur and for how long. This study shows that study abroad has a significant impact on students in the areas of continued language use, academic attainment measures, intercultural and personal development, and career choices. Most importantly, the study illustrates that this impact can be sustained over a period as long as 50 years.

In some categories of factors, summer students were as likely or more likely to achieve sustainable benefit from studying abroad in comparison with semester students. This seems counter-intuitive since one would expect that with declining duration of study abroad a corresponding lessening pattern of impact would result.

One explanation is that well-planned, intensive summer programs of at least 6 weeks duration can have a significant impact on student growth across a variety of important outcomes. While it requires very careful educational planning, expert implementation, and significant resources to achieve these outcomes in a shorter-term length, the results of this study should encourage study abroad educators and should reinforce the value of short-term programming of at least 6 weeks duration. Whether these results would hold for the increasingly popular 1-5 week programs is unknown. Nevertheless, clearly the greatest gains across all outcome categories are made by full-year students.

Future Research

Numerous other research projects could be pursued using the data from this study. Future research could include analyzing outcomes by country, language studied and program model used. A qualitative study could be conducted to probe for greater detail within these original findings by category of outcomes. A study on the different career paths of students by decade would reveal the changing employment contexts within which students apply their study abroad experiences. Also, it would be interesting to compare pre-study abroad and post-study abroad grade point averages (GPAs) of full-year students with semester students.

Other research questions that could be probed using the available data from this study include but are not limited to the impact of

- host-country university enrollment on multiple outcomes?
- study abroad on men versus women?
- different housing models on outcomes?

- the host-city size on outcomes?
- an intensive foreign language program on outcomes?

In conclusion, the age-old premise that 'more is better' holds true when it comes to the duration of a study abroad experience. However, the results of this study would suggest that programs of at least 6 weeks duration can be enormously successful in achieving important academic, personal, career and intercultural development outcomes.

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