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It is Better if You Come with Me: An Exploratory Investigation of Study Abroad Program Effects on Internationalized Career Interest

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Abstract

We conduct an exploratory study about study abroad programs in business schools. In a small sample, we find satisfaction with the study abroad experience is positively related to participants' reported willingness to accept jobs that require international travel and jobs that require international work collaboration. Additionally, students who developed relationships during their study abroad were more likely to evaluate the experience positively, indicating that fostering relationships is an important factor for study abroad leaders to consider. We also employed homesickness as an exploratory variable, finding that expected homesickness is negatively related to expected satisfaction with study abroad experiences, which may explain some reluctance to study and work abroad.

Keywords:

Study abroad, homesickness

Introduction

Study abroad programs are emphasized by colleges and universities as deeply valuable parts of the college experience. "It will change your life; you'll come back a new person," goes the common refrain (Dwyer & Peters, 2004). The

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push to internationalize business students emerges from the recognition that educating future business leaders involves more than imparting principles, formulas, tactics, and strategies. A critical part of the process is cultivating cross-cultural perspectives and perceptions that provide a foundation for decision-making in a global context. How do we educate globally-oriented business leaders—not just consumers—who are able to adapt across cultures in complex business environments? While most business education programs include internationally-focused functional area courses comprising or within study programs, there remains a need for focused attention to the systematic study of the role of study abroad experiences in creating global-oriented leaders and employees.

How do study abroad experiences impact the development of students' global perspectives and their perception of themselves as participants in a global economy rather than just distant observers of it? In this study, we explore the impact of study abroad on willingness to participate internationally. *Will students, after a study abroad experience, be more open to choosing an international work assignment, be more willing to work in cross-cultural teams in their jobs, and be more open to choosing work that requires international travel?* In particular, this research study explores how the satisfaction level with various aspects of the study abroad experience impacts the development of students' perceptions of themselves as globally-oriented employees. We conclude with suggestions on how study abroad experiences might be enhanced to cultivate these attitudes in students.

Background Literature

Educators have long recognized that, while learning comes through experiences, not all experiences are educational (Dewey, 1938). According to the Association for Experiential Education, “experiential learning occurs when carefully chosen experiences are supported by reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis” (AEE, 2020). Experiential learning is acknowledged to be a cyclical process: a process initiated by a learner’s focus on a given phenomenon, subsequent interaction with the phenomenon, reflection on the experience, development of generalizations and, finally, testing of those generalizations (Roberts, 2006). This process may be best summarized by the seminal work of David Kolb, whose Experiential Learning Model starts with a learner’s concrete experience, followed by reflective observation on the experience, abstract

conceptualization (including the drawing of conclusions from the experience), and active experimentation to test what was learned (Kolb, 1984).

Study abroad is an ideal incubator for experiential learning. However, for many years, much of the evidence of the value of study abroad programs has been expressed anecdotally rather than empirically. Currently, in resource-constrained universities desiring the public funding often necessary to increase and diversify participation in study abroad, anecdotal evidence may no longer be sufficient (Salisbury et al., 2013). Instead, more empirical research is needed.

Recently, there have been increased efforts by scholars to accurately measure the benefits of study abroad programs. Research on student attitudes subsequent to study abroad has noted its effect on several important traits when compared to students who have not studied abroad: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability (Greischel et al., 2018; Zimmermann & Neyer, 2013). Evidence also has linked study abroad to intercultural competence and intercultural sensitivity (Braskamp et al., 2009), along with improving creative thinking (Lee et al., 2012), and problem-solving (Alon & Higgins, 2005). Additionally, students who have participated in study abroad have demonstrated improved academic performance in courses taken after the experience, as well as higher graduation rates; moreover, academic performance of at-risk students is elevated (Redden, 2010).

Career-wise, global experiences have been predictors of an employment placement rate almost double that of students who do not study abroad, higher earnings, greater adaptation in new jobs, and gains in maturity, self-confidence, and tolerance for ambiguity (American Institute for Foreign Study, 2013). Despite these benefits comparatively few U.S. students study abroad (Ludlum et al., 2013), with one study putting the number at less than 1% (Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005). However, study abroad programs' participation has been growing steadily over the last 25 years, with as many as 16% of all students enrolled in baccalaureate programs reporting participation in such a program in 2017-18 (Redden, 2019).

Still, few empirical studies focus on business students and business career-related variables. One important paper that does is Orahood et al.'s (2004), in which students who studied abroad were found to be more interested

in working in a foreign country (41% strongly interested and 41% interested) compared to students who did not study abroad (17% strongly interested and 35% interested). Additionally, these students viewed their study abroad experience as attractive to employers, with 94% of them listing the study abroad experience on their resumes.

It is not surprising to find a number of studies revealing factors which influence a student's decision to participate in study abroad experiences. Among those factors, intercultural attitudes such as openness to other cultures and diversity, ethnocentrism, and intercultural communication apprehension have each been identified as important contributors to study abroad participation (Goldstein & Kim, 2006; Salisbury et al., 2011; Stroud, 2010). However, less is known about those factors which impact student satisfaction with a study abroad experience. A model developed and tested by Arambewela and Hall (2009) identifies seven factors which impact postgraduate students' satisfaction with international degree programs. The factors include economic considerations such as cost of living, the quality of accommodations, the educational experience, perceptions of safety, perceptions of the prestige of the host university, and access to technology. The model also identifies a "social" component which includes items related to the availability of social activities and counseling services.

Intuitively, many of these same factors should have a similar impact on satisfaction with short-term study abroad programs, those few days or weeks rather than several months or years. Of particular interest in this study is the influence of social factors on satisfaction. Specifically, to what extent do the relationships created or further developed through study abroad experiences impact student satisfaction with that study abroad program? As depicted in the proposed model (see Figure 1), we anticipate that development of relationships through a study abroad program will have a positive impact on student satisfaction. Study abroad programs present students with unique challenges as well as opportunities. Students who form meaningful relationships with faculty, fellow students, and others have access to a localized social network which should help students to cope with the myriad of challenges often presented when studying abroad. Furthermore, that satisfaction is positively related to a variety of ways available for students to internationalize their career options.

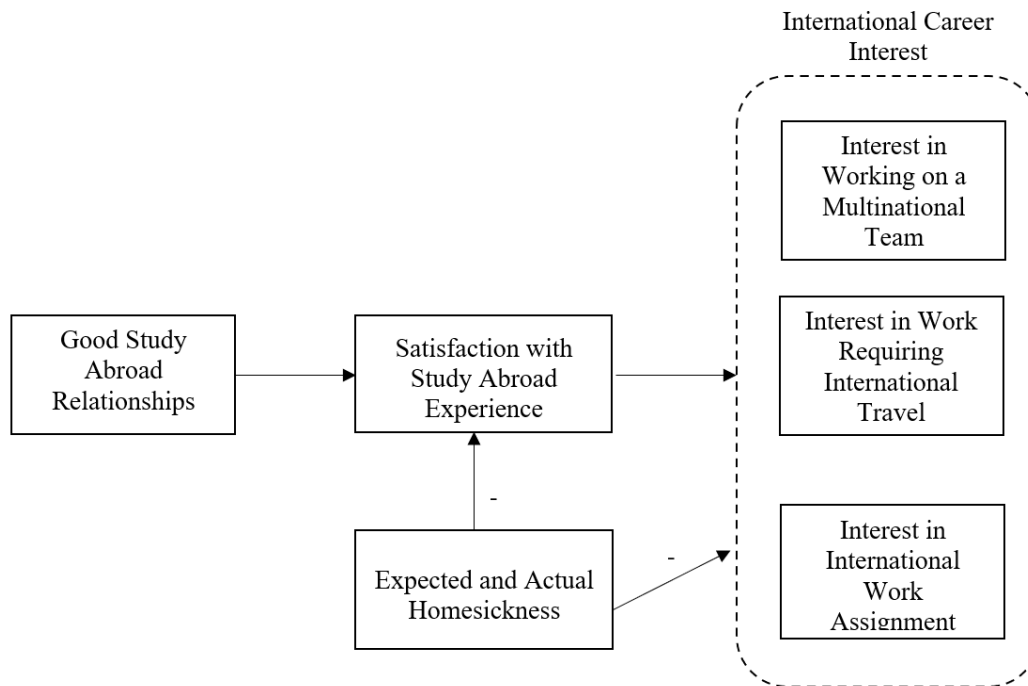


FIGURE (1): CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The Proposed Model

As depicted in Figure (1), we propose a model with several propositions:

Proposition 1: The perceived quality of the relationship among study abroad participants will positively impact individual students' program satisfaction.

I anticipate students who form healthy, personal relationships through the study abroad experience will report higher satisfaction with the study abroad experience. While student perceptions of housing, cost of living, reputation of a host university, and access to technology likely impact satisfaction with study abroad programs (just as with the international degree programs studied by Arambewela and Hall (2009), faculty or administrators have little or no control over improving them to students' benefit. However, that is not the case with social factors. Faculty and program administrators may incorporate activities prior, during, and after a study abroad program to facilitate relationship-building among the students traveling together, improving student experiences. Consequently, the proposed model focuses specifically on relationship-building and its potential impact on satisfaction in study abroad programming. Students faced with unfamiliar surroundings are likely to be reassured and more

confident when they develop a camaraderie with others experiencing the same stresses and adventures. When these relationships persist after returning, the positive memories of new cultural experiences are likely to be reinforced, driving up program satisfaction levels.

I propose study abroad program satisfaction will subsequently impact several important career aspirations for participants:

Proposition 2: The individual's perceived satisfaction with the study abroad experience will be positively associated with a greater interest in international work assignments.

A satisfying study abroad experience, grounded in positive interpersonal relationships, provides students with the confidence needed for in working in a multinational context and lead to the transfer of positive experiences during study abroad to perceived anticipated experiences in future employment opportunities. Regarding the latter, greater interest in a long-term international work assignment should reflect the students' enhanced openness to assimilation and enculturation. While short-term (i.e., 1-2 week) study abroad programs may not provide students with the time necessary to adjust to a new lifestyle, study abroad programs with longer durations (e.g., a summer or semester or longer) provide such opportunities for enhanced satisfaction and more developed cohort relationships.

Proposition 3: The individual's perceived satisfaction with the study abroad experience will be positively associated with a greater interest in working on a multinational team.

Study abroad courses are often designed to benefit from the opportunities and resources available in a host country. Additionally, individual and group assignments that are focused on multinational issues or cases are encouraged in study abroad courses. During the study abroad, they get a chance to think about, meet, socialize with, and work with individuals of different cultural norms and expectations. Having these experiences makes these students more comfortable with and amenable to work teams comprised members from different cultures.

Proposition 4: The individual's perceived satisfaction with the study abroad experience will be positively associated with a greater interest in work that requires international travel.

I also believe satisfaction in a study abroad program will influence a student's willingness to consider job opportunities requiring international travel. The proposed model distinguishes between interest in work requiring international travel and employment requiring one to live abroad. International travel can be daunting, complicated, and stressful; a satisfying study abroad experience should provide confidence in the act of traveling abroad. Particularly for students who have never traveled internationally prior to their study abroad, a satisfying experience should bolster confidence in employment requiring international travel.

Finally, we engaged in some exploratory research about another variable that might influence ultimate study abroad outcomes: homesickness. In particular, we examined expected homesickness and actual homesickness because homesickness is an obstacle commonly faced by those traveling abroad. Van Tilburg (2005) defines homesickness as "an emotion which is felt after leaving house and home and is characterized by negative emotions, ruminative cognitions about home, and somatic symptoms" (p. 35). Homesickness has been conceptualized as both a normal reaction (Bergsma, 1963) and an emotion with potentially pathological effects for those unable to cope with the emotion. Although the literature does not agree to any one definition, there is a general consensus that homesickness includes missing home and friends, feeling lonely, problems with adaption to new environments, and regularly thinking about home. Therefore, homesickness may be conceptualized as a disturbing emotional experience caused by separation from home, family, familiar people, and an accustomed environment, as well as a condition with physical, emotional, cognitive, and psychomotor components. Homesickness may negatively impact the study abroad experience, but *expected* homesickness may discourage students from studying abroad to begin with. Students may anticipate that their study abroad experience will be unsatisfactory simply because they anticipate that they will experience homesickness.

Proposition 5a: Expected homesickness will be negatively related to expected study abroad satisfaction.

Proposition 5b: Homesickness will be negatively related to internationalized career interest.

Methods

Sample and Procedure

The sample consists of students at a university in the southeastern United States who participated in a business-centered study abroad program in a non-English-speaking country. The pretest sample includes 36 students. The post-test sample is a subset of the pretest sample and consists of participants who responded to the pretest survey; the post-test sample has 16 respondents. Students were surveyed both before and after the study abroad experience, an elapsed time of seven weeks between the pretest and the post-test data collections.

Measures of Model Constructs

Quality of Study Abroad Relationships (relationship)

Relationships are more meaningful if they extend beyond the proximal study abroad experience; thus, we use established relationships as a proxy for relationship quality. Participants were asked how much they agreed with the following statement: "I have relationships from the study abroad that have carried over since we have returned" using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The mean for this question is 6.06 out of 7, with a standard deviation of 1.34.

Satisfaction with Study Abroad Experience (expsatisfaction, post-satisfaction)

In the pretest, we asked students on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being highest) to anticipate how much they expect to be satisfied with their study abroad experience (expsatisfaction). After the study abroad experience was completed, we asked them to evaluate their actual satisfaction, using the same 10-point scale. Prior to their study abroad, students had high expectations for satisfaction (mean = 8.60, SD = 1.26). Post-test data also reveals high satisfaction levels although the data shows more variance (mean = 8.50, SD = 2.36).

Internationalized Career Interests

In both the pretest and post-test, we asked the same three questions to measure different options available to students regarding the internationalization of their future careers. Each item was measured on a scale of 0% (not likely at all) to 100% (definitely would) using sliding scale questionnaires in Qualtrics.

- 1) Willingness to Take an International Work Assignment (pre- and post-intlwork) was measured with, “How likely would you be to accept a job that requires you to live in a different country?”
- 2) Interest in Working on a Multinational Team (pre- and post-intlteam) was measured by, “How likely are you to accept a job which requires collaboration with companies, partners, and customers in another country?”
- 3) Interest in Work Requiring Frequent International Travel (pre- and post-intltrvl) was assessed with, “How likely would you be to accept a job that allows you to live in your home country but requires you to frequently travel to another country?”

Homesickness

I examine homesickness as an additional exploratory variable and have included the data in Tables (1) and (2). Homesickness (pre-homesick, post-homesick) is measured by the question: “On a scale of 1-10, 10 being the highest, how homesick did you get [do you expect to get] during your study abroad experience?” The mean for this question was 3.57 (pre) and 3.73 (post).

Qualitative Data

I also collected qualitative comments on the study abroad experience in the post-test survey after the study abroad experience using the question, “Please describe how your summer study abroad helped you.”

Exploratory Analyses

I performed Pearson product-moment correlation analyses to show students’ expectations and attitudes before they left for their study abroad experience. Students’ positive satisfaction expectations (expsatisfaction) for the study abroad are not significantly correlated with individuals’ stated interest in accepting a job abroad, pre-intlwork, (.304, ns), with their willingness to accept a job with international travel, pre-intltrvl, (.230, ns), or with their willingness to accept a job with multinational collaboration, pre-intlteam, (-.007, ns).

I performed Pearson product-moment correlation analyses on the subset of students who responded to the post-travel survey. Tables (1) and (2) below show the correlation tables for these analyses, along with means and standard deviations for all variables. Although the data is from a small sample, the findings are supportive of my contention that the quality of relationships affects satisfaction with the study abroad. In the post-test sample, the quality of study abroad relationships (relationship) is strongly positively correlated with

evaluations of the study abroad experience, post-satisfaction, (.872, $p < .001$), supporting Proposition 1.

TABLE (1): PEARSON PRODUCT-MOMENT CORRELATIONS: PRE-TEST

Variable	Mean SD	1	2	3	4
1. expsatisfaction	8.86 1.26	1.000			
2. pre-intlwork	54.48 28.21	.304	1.000		
3. pre-intltrvl	74.74 26.97	.230	.828**	1.000	
4. pre-intlteam	84.88 16.14	-.007	.568	.614**	1.000
5. pre-homesick	3.57 2.54	-.440**	-.152	-.116	.150

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)

* Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)

TABLE (2): PEARSON PRODUCT-MOMENT CORRELATIONS: POST-TEST

Variable	Mean SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. relationships	6.06 1.34	1.000				
2. post-satisfaction	8.50 2.36	.872**	1.000			
3. post-intlwork	60.50 30.12	.201	.393	1.000		
4. post-intltrvl	74.62 29.99	.329	.619*	.807**	1.000	
5. post-intlteam	84.89 16.15	.705**	.854**	.310	.550*	1.000
6. post-homesick	3.73 2.84	.018	-.160	-.376	-.571*	.061

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)

* Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)

I observe that actual satisfaction with the study abroad experience (post-satisfaction) is significantly correlated with two of the three internationalized career options: students' willingness to accept a job that requires frequent travel

to another country, post-intlrvl, (.619, $p < .05$); and willingness to accept a job that requires international collaboration, post-intlteam, (.854, $p < .01$). willingness to accept a job in another country, post-intlwork, is not positively correlated with post-satisfaction (.393, *ns*). importantly, as we have noted, pre-travel expected satisfaction (expsatisfaction) is not significantly correlated with any of the three international career interest variables. Even with a small sample, this data clearly suggests that the study abroad experience influenced attitudes about career internationalization. While we do not find support for Proposition 2, we find support for Propositions 3 and 4.

Analysis of the pretest homesickness data shows that when individuals have more expectations of being homesick, the lower their expectations for a good study abroad experience (-.440, $p = .008$), thus providing support for Proposition 5a. However, in the post-test analysis, actual homesickness does not have a statistically significant correlation with actual satisfaction with the study abroad experience (-.160, *ns*). Results shown in Table 2 also show that actual homesickness was negatively correlated with all three measures of internationalized career interest, but only significantly negatively correlated with interest in international travel for work (-.571, $p < .05$). Thus, we find some limited support for Proposition 5b.

I examine qualitative data collected from participants after their return in addition to the survey questions. We draw attention to the number of the comments focused on two principal themes suggesting both relational outcomes and self-assuredness. Exemplar responses include:

I was able to take on challenges of travel and become much closer to a friend I was with and have benefitted in that relationship since returning.

I have grown exponentially as a person and formed relationships that will last forever.

... when I came back I had so many more friends from the relationships I cultivated while [there].

It also helped introduce me to new people on campus that I may not have been able to meet had I not gone.

It has helped me be more social and have the awkward first conversations with others.

... it was a great experience to get to meet those kids, and they were so

different (from) the kids at [my university]. I think I all really benefitted. It also forced you to make friends because half of them you've never met.

These qualitative statements support the belief that the quality of relationships is related to positive evaluations of study abroad experiences.

Discussion

I find some evidence that students' satisfaction with of their study abroad experiences is positively associated with willingness to internationalize their career options and expectations. The approach in this study extends that in Orahod et al.'s (2004) in that we do not simply ask about interest in working overseas; instead, we gather several kinds of internationalized interest: an international work assignment, frequent foreign travel, and collaborating from one's home country as part of a multinational team.

We have some evidence (see Table 2) that these three career variables may reflect a higher-order construct reflecting professional aspects related to an attitude of global citizenship. Further research should explore the relationships among willingness to accept variations of internationalized jobs, as well as other career facets of global citizenship. Of the three correlations among the variables, only the relationship between willingness to take an international job assignment and willingness to work on multinational teams is not significant, in both the pre-travel and post-travel scenarios. The reasons for this pattern are unclear; it could be that the wording of the question pits them as mutually exclusive rather than formative sub-constructs. Additional data is needed to clarify the connections among the career variables.

Prior research indicates that positive study abroad experiences impact students, but findings are limited in describing the mechanisms by which and the contexts in which the study abroad experience has its effects. This exploratory investigation suggests that building and maintaining good interpersonal relationships during the study abroad experience are an important predictor of positive effects. We find a significant positive correlation between the quality of relationships developed during the study abroad and satisfaction with the study abroad. Moreover, we also find significant positive correlations between international career interests (jobs with frequent foreign travel and willingness to collaborate in multinational teams) and satisfaction with the study abroad. This pattern of results strongly suggests that the relationship factors within a study abroad cohort are very important to the

internationalization of student perceptions of their future careers. These study cohorts help the students address the stresses that come with living, studying, and traveling in a foreign country. These study abroad cohort relationships, when lasting, have spillover effects on how positively students evaluate possible internationalization options for their own careers. Additional evidence for this conclusion is the fact that before the study abroad, these links are not there; however, afterwards, these links are present.

The inconsistent results regarding willingness to accept an international work assignment are interesting. While the research participants were willing to collaborate with or travel to foreign locations for work, that interest does not extend to living abroad based on this limited data. Clearly, more research is needed to explore this phenomenon. Will students with more international travel experience react differently than those having a first-time international experience when considering international work assignments? Does the length or location of the possible work assignment matter (especially considering the role of a new language for notoriously monolingual U.S. students)? How much and how do established significant other relationships in the home country affect reactions to the study abroad? We do not, in this study, have the data to tease out the reasons for this provocative finding.

Homesickness may indirectly point to the importance of relationships in study abroad experience. In the pretest, the degree to which individuals have expectations for a positive study abroad experience has a significant zero-order correlation with expected satisfaction; but relationships have a positive correlation with actual satisfaction in the post-test. We suspect that homesickness may reflect the degree to which people miss not just a place, but familiar people. To the degree that individuals have good relational experiences during their study abroad, homesickness (or the effects of homesickness) might be reduced, although the data in this study is limited and warrants further examination.

This work, though exploratory, suggests a several important implications. For educators designing and leading study abroad programs, these results indicate that it is valuable to work to help students build good relationships with each other, with faculty, and those with whom they interact, as these relationships may have significant impact on the students' program satisfaction. In the rush to acclimate students to new sights and cultures, the relationships among the study abroad cohort members should not be shortchanged, as it may

be a mechanism that assists students in developing long-term internationalization perspectives. Cohort relationships help students reduce stress and raise cross-cultural confidence. This work also suggests that internationalizing careers has multiple levels and dimensions: working abroad, traveling abroad for work, or collaborating on multinational teams; study abroad experiences may have differential effects on each of these outcomes. Additionally, multinational firms who are looking to hire students who would be comfortable and willing to have an internationalized career would do well to look for students who have study abroad experiences, and they may be able to increase the pipeline of new employees who are willing work internationally by supporting and investing in study abroad programs.

Although exploratory, this study has a small sample; additional data and variables can help explain these phenomena more clearly. The sample consisted of students traveling to Europe (Austria); future research should consider whether the study abroad location influences outcomes, particularly in places where it is may be difficult to find English speakers. We also suggest looking at differences between long-term study abroad and short-term study experiences, as this research was conducted in the context of a short-term faculty-led study abroad experience. When it comes to interest in jobs requiring long-term commitments to living abroad, students with a satisfying experience with longer term study abroad programs may report greater interest in such work responsibilities than those in shorter experiences. It is also worth noting that participants in this study were enrolled in study abroad programs populated by students from the same university. Consequently, many participants in the study likely had relationships with other participants and the teaching faculty prior to the study abroad or, at a minimum, shared something in common with their peers. The importance of relationship-building toward creating satisfaction may be even more important for students who choose a study abroad program not populated by students or faculty from their home school.

A longitudinal study of the persistence of these internationalization of careers perspectives is also ripe for exploration. While we found that homesickness influenced satisfaction in this particular study, future research could measure homesickness at various times during the study abroad experience to explore its effects more fully. For example, homesickness might reduce the expected benefits of study abroad, but good relationships during the study abroad itself might ameliorate or eliminate the effects of homesickness.

This exploratory research indicates that investigating what factors help students to get value out of their study abroad experiences could be a fruitful area of research, and we suggest that satisfaction with the study abroad program and the quality of the relationships cultivated during the experience are areas to investigate further. Future research might also explore other social and structural factors that impact satisfaction. Finally, an important contribution of this paper is that we show that there are likely multiple dimensions of career internationalization that should be considered as meaningful outcomes by businesses, business schools, students, and facilitators of study abroad programs.

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