

# Studying Abroad in Nepal: Assessing Impact

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

*“I learned that no matter how hard you try to understand a culture, ethnicity, language, or people, you can’t REALLY ever know what it’s like to live as they do...I really took away the knowledge of constant learning, of constant reevaluation of your own personal perceptions, while still maintaining one’s own identity throughout a very painful, enlightening, or challenge circumstance. I learned that the experience to be gained from cross-cultural experience is invaluable in the development of perspective, of self-fulfillment, and educational exposure.”*  
*Male student, 1997*

The Michigan State University (MSU) Nepal Multidisciplinary Program first was initiated in 1997. Since its inception, 139 students participated in this 12-week program, taking courses in the social sciences, arts and humanities, and international studies. In addition, students tour historical, educational and cultural sites, conduct independent field studies, maintain journals and participate in weekly reflective learning sessions. Before departing for Nepal, students take part in Nepalese language and cross-cultural learning sessions.

The students live with Nepalese families in the city of Pokhara (population 120,000), one of the country’s largest cities. Students learn how a developing country faces the challenges of urbanization and

industrialization, while it maintains a strong cultural heritage and natural environment. Nepal remains predominantly an agricultural economy with 91 percent of the population living in rural areas. The country's public health situation is one of the worst in the world, and its literacy rate is extremely low (Wagenaar and Subedi, 1996). In terms of social constructions, Nepal offers a unique cultural learning environment: in the last decade, its government has changed to a democracy, yet ethnic and religious beliefs and practices, kinship patterns and a caste hierarchy remain.

Although formative evaluations of the Nepal program have been conducted annually, no in-depth study had assessed students' learning and the impact of the program on their lives in relation to the program's objectives, which include developing

- intercultural understanding of and interest in a developing country,
- an understanding of the interface between social, political, religious, economic and environmental issues of Nepal as well as understanding the significance each of these issues has in relation with international development efforts in Nepal,
- an understanding of the natural resource management issues facing Nepal,
- professional skills such as motivated self-direction in work, critical observation and thinking, and communication,
- personal skills such as self-confidence and adaptability.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the reported or perceived impact of studying in Nepal on student's academic program, personal development and intellectual development. The study draws upon adult learning theory to analyze survey instrument data, interviews, and case studies to discern the impact of the program on college students and to contribute to the body of longitudinal research on U.S. study abroad programs.

## **M e t h o d o l o g y**

This study of the Nepal Program used survey and case study methods to understand if the study abroad experience affected students in ways which tie into the Program's learning objectives. To achieve the most complete results, the study used both quantitative and qualitative tools.

Program participants were asked to complete a survey instrument consisting of 26 close-ended and four open-ended questions. The Michigan State University Study Abroad Office developed the survey instrument based on study abroad research and literature. The 1997-2000 students had the opportunity to complete the survey instrument by e-mail, at a web site or through postal mail. The 2001 students completed the survey instrument at the conclusion of the program.

The first part of the instrument, consisting of 26 ordinal scale questions, was designed to document the impact on students of the study abroad program in the following areas: academics, personal development (emotional maturity, empathy and flexibility), global perspective, future career path, and intellectual development (critical thinking and problem solving). The second part of the survey instrument consisted of four open-ended questions. Students were asked to write about their peak experiences and low points, what they learned about themselves, and how the overall experience had impacted their lives. The questions were used to validate further the quantitative questions, and to obtain a fuller picture of students' experiences. Responses to each open-ended question were analyzed for themes based on study abroad literature.

After analyzing responses to the open-ended questions, some students were asked to participate in semi-structured, one-on-one interviews to explain further the impact of their study abroad experience. The four students chosen were selected based on their responses to the open-ended questions. These students had unique experiences, self-described as having affected their lives, while in Nepal. Case study analysis was used for this portion of the research, which included a search for patterns of transformational learning, self-efficacy and passion. The focus was to understand the "how" and "why" of their experiences (Yin, 1994). Such case study research may not provide generalizations applicable to all other study abroad programs, but does, at the very least, give an understanding of the Nepal study abroad participants' learning and experiences.

## **Results**

Of the 139 students who had participated in the Nepal Program since 1997, 70 students participated in this study (50.7%), of which 24 students were from the 2001 program. This latter group completed both

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pre- and post-survey instruments. Because the response rate was only 50 percent, the high means for many questions might indicate that those who did not have a positive experience or passion for studying abroad did not participate in the survey. The analysis of the post-survey data included descriptive statistics, one-way analysis of variance and t-tests.

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*Table 1: Response Rate (by Year of Participation)*

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<b>Year of Participation</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>	<b>Percent of Respondents</b>
1997	10	43.5 %
1998	8	32.0 %
1999	10	32.0%
2000	18	58.%1
2001	24	82.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>50.7%</b>

Of those 70 participants, 52 (74.3%) had never studied abroad before. The length of the programs varied from two weeks to semester-long programs. The majority of the students had traveled outside of the U.S. or Canada. 25.7 percent of the students had been out of the U.S. four or more times, while only 22.9 percent of the participants had never traveled outside of the U.S. or Canada. Their travels were primarily with family.

**Perceptions of Impacts**

The individual questions for all former participants show high mean scores of 4.0 and greater (54%) for the different aspects of the students' experiences (Table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for 1997-2001 Nepal Participants

Statement about study abroad	Number (N)	Mean* (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
<i>[Global Perspective]**</i>			
Contributed to my overall understanding of Nepal	70	4.84	.40
Increased my desire to work/study abroad in the future	69	4.80	.50
Contributed to my understanding of other cultures	70	4.67	.50
Increased my curiosity about other cultures	70	4.61	.64
Enhanced concern with problems of developing countries	46	4.57	.75
Enhanced my understanding of international issues	70	4.46	.63
Increased my appreciation of human difference	46	4.54	.69
Contributed and/or created a new understanding of critical social issues	57	4.32	.69
Increased my level of comfort around people different from me	70	4.31	.75
<i>[Personal Development]</i>			
Enhanced my self-reliance	70	4.26	.83
Increased my ability to cope with unfamiliar situations	70	4.20	.71
Increased my open-mindedness	70	4.16	.83
Enhanced my independence	46	4.09	.84
Increased my understanding of my own culture	46	4.07	1.00
Enhanced my desire to interact with a stranger *	46	3.80	.93
Increased my feeling of personal effectiveness	46	3.78	1.01
Encouraged me to seek out a more diverse group of friends	46	3.41	1.11
Helped develop my leadership skills	70	3.26	1.05
<i>[Intellectual Development]</i>			
Increased my skills to communicate in the language of the host culture	45	3.84	1.07
Enhanced my critical thinking skills	70	3.81	.98
Improved my problem-solving skills	70	3.37	.95
<i>[Professional Development]</i>			
Favorably impressed potential employers	66	3.64	1.17
Made me reconsider my career plans	46	3.15	1.49
Helped me find professional direction	70	2.84	1.38
<i>[Academic]</i>			
Led to an improvement of my academic performance	70	3.29	.93
Distracted from my academic performance	70	2.40	.84

\*Mean was based on a 1-5 scale with 1=not at all, 2=very little, 3=some, 4=quite a bit, 5=very much.

\*\*The italicized phrases describe the data being measured by the statements below each phrase.

The highest mean scores were for questions in the areas of understanding and acquiring knowledge about Nepal, international issues, and different cultures, including human difference. The highest scoring question was “contributed to my overall understanding of Nepal” (mean of 4.84). In addition, “increased my desire to travel/study/work abroad” had a mean score of 4.80 (with standard deviation of .50). In other words, 69 (out of 70) students who answered this question marked the box “very much” or “quite a bit” for desire to travel abroad in the future.

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The two question areas with the lowest mean scores were academics and career. There were two questions on academic performance. One question asked if studying in Nepal “led to an improvement of my academic performance” with a resulting mean of 3.29, (standard deviation of .93). The other academic question, that studying in Nepal “distracted me from my academic performance” had a mean score of 2.40. The three career path questions scored even lower than the academic questions: “made me reconsider my career plans (mean of 3.15),” “favorably impress potential employers (mean of 3.64),” and “helped me find professional direction” (a mean of 2.84). Intellectual development, as measured by problem-solving skill competencies, was the other low scoring question.

The next part of the data analysis compared the means of the questions with consideration of gender, travel outside the country and year of study in Nepal. An independent t-test was computed to determine if perceived impacts of studying abroad differed by sex. Taking all questions into account, the mean scores were not found to be statistically different.

To assess any difference between the possible impact on a student who participated in 1997 and a student who studied in Nepal in 2001, an analysis of variance by years was conducted for the individual questions. Again, there was no statistical significance when taking into account the year a student had studied in Nepal.

Finally, to evaluate if previous travel affected the impact of studying abroad in Nepal, a t-test was calculated between the mean scores of those students who had never traveled abroad compared to those students who had traveled beyond the U.S. or Canada. The overall findings were not statistically significant. The reason behind this could be that most program participants had some previous international experience; only 29 percent of the 70 students had never been outside of the U.S. or Canada before their time in Nepal.

In answering the open-ended questions, students focused primarily on their high or peak experiences and what they learned about themselves. As for the low points or experiences, several explained that they became sick and how that affected their feelings of being in a third world country. None of those who said that they became sick stated that it also affected their perceptions of their entire experience. One student noted that being sick was very lonely because his host family would not go near him, because they were afraid they would catch his sickness.

Overall, the statements in response to the open-ended questions were positive and indicated that the experience had impacted their lives in some way or another:

A 1997 woman student: “I plan on getting my doctorate so that I can teach college students. I want my teaching to reflect the experiential basis that I received from my experiences overseas. I have a wanderlust that led me into teaching so that others may experience the value of life outside their comfort level and beyond their own culture.”

A 1997 male student: “This program has given my career a focus I could not have possibly foreseen prior to my experience overseas. It has proved invaluable in my exposure to the possibilities in changing the world, one policy at a time.” This student is currently studying International Development Management as it relates to NGO’s and non-profit organizations in the developing world at a school on the east coast.

A male student: “It was easily the most powerful experience I’ve ever had. I learned that I could let myself go around people and be accepted for who I am.”

A woman student recounts the trek in the mountains with the other students. “The people we encountered were incredible...I will never forget the day I saw a man half my size, tiny, tiny man, carrying a refrigerator on his back!! On top of that he was passing me!! On his way by me he said cheerfully, “*namaste moto Didi*” (“Hello fat sister”) and all I could do was laugh! It really was an amazing experience. I learned a lot about myself and my capabilities as well as the mountains, an integral part of Nepalese culture, economy, etc.”

## **Case Studies**

In order to reach a fuller understanding of the impact of the Nepal study abroad experience, and also to increase the depth of the survey

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question answers, four participants, two women and two men were asked to take part in one-on-one interviews. The student survey guided the formation of the interview questions. Students from the 2001 program were excluded because of the timing of the interviews. The names of the participants whose stories are discussed below have been changed to protect their identity.

**Amanda's theme: spirituality and education**

Amanda participated in the MSU Nepal program in 1998, and before traveling to Nepal had never traveled outside of North America. Amanda's survey revealed that her study abroad experience in Nepal impacted her professional direction, her views of critical social issues and problems within developing countries, her independence, and her comfort level around people. Because of her Nepal study abroad experience, she added education courses to her degree plan. After receiving her degree, Amanda planned to work in a developing country, as a missionary focusing on community development.

When Amanda was asked about the impact on her life from studying in Nepal, she stated that it "affirmed spirituality." Before going abroad, she had questioned how God could reach people in remote areas, and while in Nepal, she found an answer to her question. Amanda was struggling to write her independent study paper on "Children with Disabilities in Pokhara, Nepal." While working on the paper, she felt an impulse to visit a missionary-run leprosy center in Pokhara, and, acting on this feeling, she went. Amanda recounted meeting there a 13-year old girl, a patient: "Due to the disease, she had been shunned from her village after the death of her parents. She was beaten and starved by her uncle, and attempted suicide in a mountain river, along with her sisters. However, God intervened and she ended up at the leprosy center, where she was receiving treatment." The missionaries at the leprosy center taught the girl to read, a valuable skill in a country where the literacy rate for women is only 27 percent.

This experience profoundly impacted Amanda. She saw missionaries as a community resource, helping people in developing countries with their social, physical, and emotional needs, as well as spiritual needs, and "coming alongside the people," instead of imposing their beliefs. Amanda's

assumptions about missionary life re-formed, she discovered a new passion in life, and has created strategies for living according to this passion.

In addition to transforming her concept of the way in which a personal religious calling may be implemented for the good of a civic community, Amanda came to appreciate the liberating effect on people of literacy. Her understanding of education and its importance as a tool for social change was transformed. She concluded that as in her future work as a missionary, she will be able to teach people to read, a valuable and liberating skill.

Amanda realized that studying abroad made the world “more reachable,” and made her more independent. “The Nepal experience impacted my life both spiritually and educationally, as well as helped me more deeply to understand another culture and how to relate with other people. Even three years later, people I met and experiences I had in Nepal still come up often in conversation. The experience helped change my way of viewing the world, the needs of people, and my personal role.”

#### Dan’s theme: cultural relativity and self-efficacy

Dan studied in Nepal in 2000. He previously had traveled outside of the United States three times, including a two-week stint in Belize studying tropical biology. Dan was transformed by his Nepal study abroad experiences, and by reflecting on those experiences. His observations echo Kauffman, Martin and Weaver (1992)’s assertion that international education impacts a student’s perceptions about one’s own culture, or the host culture, and one’s personal development.

Dan stated, “The most memorable and most beautiful part of my time in Nepal was my internalization of it, the way it shaped me. I learned what is necessary for me and what isn’t with regard to my home culture. I learned which assumptions held water for me, and I had the opportunity to question them. For instance, one of many lessons in cultural relativity, being confronted with the reality of arranged marriages, something I hadn’t considered to be valuable previously. When faced with their efficacy in the Nepali context, however, I had to reevaluate my beliefs about the institution of marriage. The difference between the U.S. and Nepal is two people versus two families.” Later, when he stayed on to trek through Katmandu and India, Dan found that the true picture of Nepal was decontextualized during the program, that the students had a limited view of Nepal.

Dan also saw significant personal growth. At the time, he was looking to go as far away from Michigan as possible. As he stated, “I couldn’t go much further than Nepal.” His Nepal experiences taught him to be adaptable, flexible and patient—and what “time” and “late” meant to different cultures. “Among many other things, my time in Nepal has shown me the importance of family; it has given me self-confidence the likes of which I’ve never known before; it has shown me unparalleled beauty in both the landscape and the people—*Bahun* and oppressed caste alike; it has given me another home.”

#### Shane’s theme: transformational learning and self-efficacy

Shane studied in Nepal in 1999 and his previous international travel had been to England. Shane experienced increased feelings of personal effectiveness, self-reliance and independence, open-mindedness, and an appreciation of human difference. With regard to his international perspective, Shane highlighted his Nepal experience as contributing to his understanding of critical social issues and enhancing his concern with the problems facing developing countries. Shane dealt with culture shock, which led to transformational learning, along with an increase in his self-efficacy.

Shane stated that his Nepal study abroad experience made him reconsider his career plans. Before going to Nepal, Shane, a religious studies major, was wavering between entering graduate school and joining the Peace Corps. Upon his return to MSU, he made the decision to join the Peace Corps, and was sent to Mongolia to teach English.

When asked why his experience in Nepal had increased his appreciation of human difference and his ability to deal with different social customs, Shane noted that Nepal was a different world entirely. Before he went to Nepal he considered himself very open-minded, but through living with his host family, he realized that he had to rethink his values and attitude. An incident in his *Didi*’s home brought this to his attention. The laundrywoman entered the house one morning, poured herself some tea, and then went to the corner of the room and squatted. He wanted to offer his chair to her but realized that would have “thrown a wrench in life” with his host family. As a result, he realized the importance of entering into a situation without expectations and with an open mind. Shane

learned that “there are so many different ways of thinking and doing things. Your [one’s own] reality is the not the reality of the world.”

“Going to Nepal made me realize that I am capable of many more things than I thought. It gave me a broader perspective on the world and helped me to see how much I take for granted. I don’t think a day goes by when I don’t think about Nepal.”

### Stephanie’s theme: culture shock and passion

Stephanie, an environmental studies major who had never traveled outside the U.S., studied in Nepal in 1999. Her experiences enhanced her critical thinking skills, self-reliance, increased her appreciation of human difference, and honed her skills for dealing with frustration.

Stephanie came to the MSU Nepal program from another institution (the University of Michigan), majoring in environmental policy. “I feel my experience in Nepal has prepared me well for this type of work (international environmental issues) and I am confident that one day I will be able to apply what I learned abroad to a job that makes me feel like I’m doing something to improve the conditions I saw overseas,” Stephanie noted.

From her study abroad experience in Nepal, she learned “that the most important things in life are working towards what you are passionate about and surrounding yourself with wonderful people.” The experience helped her put her future career in a larger context. She now works in Washington, D.C. for an environmental consulting company. Stephanie indicated that studying abroad helped increase her independence, beginning with the fact that she was from a different home institution, the University of Michigan. Thus, she found herself adjusting to a new peer group, as well as a completely different culture. She developed more open-mindedness to other people’s way of life. Stephanie loved living with her Nepalese family, although she learned to sacrifice her privacy because the host family treated her as a family member. This meant that the family unit was the primary social focus, and left no time for her to be alone. She and another student were the first students to stay with this particular family, and the family was eager to learn about the girls’ lives. Stephanie vividly remembers sitting around and sharing stories with her host family. The one moment of solitude she recounted was the occasion of a Ferris wheel ride at a local festival; at the time, both she and her American roommate laughed because it was the only time they were able to

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be alone without being interrupted.

Stephanie said that, initially, everything was “new and exciting” in Nepal, but after a few weeks the reality of living in a new culture set in. The lack of privacy, pollution, poverty and the political structure all contributed to Stephanie’s case of culture shock. She stated that she felt even worse culture shock, however, when she returned to the U.S., because of the different pace of life, the higher degree of stress and the culture of consumerism. She said that Americans listened to her stories about life in Nepal, but she found it difficult to convey adequately the entire experience, the sounds, smells, sights, and her feelings.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The findings of this study provide some evidence that students’ lives are impacted by their study abroad experiences in specific ways. The impact on the students focuses on those survey responses receiving high mean scores as they relate to the program’s learning objectives. The programs’ key learning objectives focused on global perspective, professional development, academics, and personal development. The highest mean scores were on questions related to the students’ understanding, curiosity and appreciation of Nepal, other cultures, international issues, and human differences. The data show that students not only learned about Nepal, but also came away with a deep awareness of international and social issues, especially in the case of developing countries. Students became aware of poverty, multi-national business, government, economics and health, all of which are key aspects of the program’s learning objectives.

The survey findings show that the students do not believe that they developed professional skills at the expense of understanding international social issues. The mean scores were lower for the professional skills; problem-solving skills and critical thinking skills had mean scores below 4.0. We would argue that students probably enhanced their skills when it came to leadership or problem-solving, but they may not have reflected specifically on these types of learning, or they did not place them into a larger, lifelong context. While answering the survey instrument, they may have thought about using these skills within the classroom in Nepal, but not about their use of the skills while they were interacting with the Nepalese environment out of the classroom.

An analysis of the responses to the open-ended questions and case studies shows that studying in Nepal helps students focus on lifelong goals and to communicate with people from different cultures. The latter result was highlighted in the case studies, when the students were asked about their independent study projects. Students had indicated that the classroom portion of the study abroad experience was weak, in contrast to the value of their independent study. In the case studies, the students talked about how they learned to work on projects without direction, and were successful. In addition, they described their interaction with the Nepalese, in cab rides, in a monastery or at home with their host families. Without being asked specifically about the learning objectives of developing professional skills, those students who were interviewed talked about these skills openly and vividly through their stories, and the independent study projects featured prominently in these responses. Additional studies of the participants should be conducted to understand fully if the learning objective of developing professional skills is being met, and such studies should include individual interviews and focus groups during and immediately after the study in Nepal, and also years later.

The open-ended questions and case studies painted a clearer picture of how the students developed their personal skills, such as self-confidence and self-efficacy, during their time in Nepal. Previous studies have shown that asking students to share journals and to participate in discussions groups throughout their stay in a foreign country are effective methods for researching and learning about the students' personal development. Specifically, Wagner and Magistrale (1995) discuss the importance of having students write about their everyday experiences while studying abroad. Students learn from writing about their cross-cultural experiences; analyzing their writings individually and with others can help them overcome culture shock.

International educators need to develop the means to grasp fully the impact of study abroad programs on students' lives and the different types of learning they carry with them for a lifetime, differentiating between outputs and outcomes. This study is a beginning, but further steps must be taken. Utilizing data from student journals, one-on-one interviews, focus groups and post-program follow-up surveys, more sophisticated methods should be developed for understanding the impact of programs during their functioning, and after students return to the U.S. Ideally, the

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analysis would not stop after six-months or one year, but would continue as longitudinal analysis. Unless we closely follow students after their study abroad experience, we will never understand how they have played a role in society, and if their role was a result of their study abroad experience.

As for affective learning, another neglected area, educators need to create methods to analyze students' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors during and after their study abroad program. For some students, becoming aware of, or the transformation of, their beliefs, values or behaviors may not occur while they are in abroad, but only after their return to the U.S. For instance, as Stephanie stated, returning home was more difficult for her than adapting to life in Nepal.

As one student stated, "I feel I am a much stronger person because of this experience and my interpersonal skills improved after the study abroad program." Our analysis of the impact of studying in Nepal for a semester confirms that this type of experience aids the students in more than one way. Students have been impacted personally, academically and professionally by the Nepal program.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Since late 2001, the MSU Nepal Interdisciplinary Program has been suspended indefinitely for reasons of safety and security; MSU fully intends to resume the program as soon as it safe to do so.