Adjustments in Study Abroad Requirements for U.S. Higher Education System Are Needed to Increase College Students’ Bi-sensibility

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Summary of Research

Abstract

Current foreign language requirements at North American colleges, specifically in the Midwest, do not adequately prepare students to use another language in a globalized world. This paper will discuss the current problems in study abroad programs that hinder the benefits study abroad can offer psychologically, sociologically and linguistically for students. Study abroad should focus on enabling students to become “bi-sensible” citizens of the world. Bi-sensible citizens acquire a new perspective from a culture not native to their own. This level of exposure requires the student to live in the culture and it is not equivalent to a classroom experience. Secondary and primary sources will be used to complete this extended literature review.

Introduction

Studying abroad is one-way students can increase their cultural and linguistic competence. Unfortunately, there are gaps in current study abroad requirements at North American universities that may hinder students from becoming bi-sensible citizens. Consistent gaps identified include the absence of cultural orientation before and after the sojourn, the lack of academic requirements while abroad, and a lack of required language use, with other students or host nationals. In addition, research has shown that males and minority students are under-represented in study abroad programs, possibly due to a lapse in marketing. These issues are explored through the use of primary and secondary literature, and suggested improvements are offered based on the data presented, such as exposing students to foreign cultures at younger ages and altering study abroad marketing techniques to reach a more diverse audience. By addressing these issues, programs can help students by giving them the tools to become bi-sensible.
Defining Bi-sensibility

Texas Chicano poet Tino Villanueva describes bi-sensibility or *bien-sensibismo* as “the experiencing of something from two points of reference,” or two alternative viewpoints, in his article, “Language Choice in Literature.” Bi-sensibility is bicultural and bilingual fluency attained by exposure to a language’s culture. Students cannot become bi-sensible, global citizens in a classroom in the United States surrounded by students of their same race and culture. Esmeralda Santiago, a bilingual author from Puerto Rico, is a good example of bi-sensibility: she writes in English and thinks in Spanish. Santiago believes both languages enhance her cultural identity. She writes, “The world is moving toward forming partnerships, and we are enriched by feeling that we can have two cultures. Without losing our roots, we can understand and celebrate other cultures. We are more complete individuals—adding, not subtracting” (Bianco, 62). For this research, study abroad is defined as the pursuit of educational opportunities and activities in an international setting (Study Abroad Administration). Although students can benefit from cultural experiences in diverse populations in their community, this research will focus on the effects of international exposure. Both secondary and primary qualitative data were gathered to complete the extended literature review.

Adjustments in Study Abroad Requirements

Elements like orientation and cultural exposure are important for students’ bi-sensible growth while abroad and are consistently missing in study abroad requirements at universities across the nation. The data, gathered from the websites of 12 universities, represent a wide geographic and diverse population. A recurring theme in the data was the absence of orientation, academic rigor and language proficiency. Jane Jackson highlights in her study that, “in order for students to understand their experience fully, there needs to be reflection before the trip, as well as similar exercises during and after.” According to their websites, five of the 12 universities require orientation before the sojourn, and none of the universities require orientation after or during. Kevin W. Dean and Michael B. Jendzurski discuss how programs fall short when it comes to post-travel orientation and evaluation (102). The majority of the universities evaluated also do not require enrollment in a university abroad, daily assignments or scheduled time with host nationals. Michael Vande Berg, R. Michael Paige and Kris Hemming Lou report that students should study language for longer periods of time, live with host families, enroll in university courses and spend free time with host nationals (17). They also suggest, that “students [be] provided with a series of assignments each week that are designed to stimulate engagement with the host culture” (348). Addressing these issues could increase the retention of information students bring back after their travels.

Reflection is important after a student decides to study abroad, not only to aid in implementation of their trip, but also to gather data on the effects of foreign travel on the student. In order to have efficient data, researchers need more students to evaluate. A NAFSA: Association of International Educators study in 2010-2011 reported that 1% of U.S. College students had studied abroad that year. In 2009 and 2010, the U.S. ranked the lowest of all continental regions for the amount of students studying in other countries, and 77.8 % of the students who do participate are Caucasian. Further research could help programs understand the reasons some students do not participate in study abroad. Three gaps in current research are grade school exposure, minority and male participation.

Foreign language learning “should come early…because the young child learns a foreign language with ease and pleasure,” (Securing America’s Future 101). If young students are exposed to culture early, they might be more interested in study abroad when they are younger. Students familiar with a language or a culture when they are younger might grow up with a heightened sense of cultural competence and curiosity. Horace Mann Dual Language Magnet School in Wichita, Kansas incorporates culture and language into their school curriculum. According to the website, the school mission statement is, “to establish a strong, standards-based curriculum, which promotes high academic achievement in both English and Spanish, in an environment that embraces diversity and strives for excellence.” The students learn how to read, write and communicate in Spanish and English. Bilingual schools are an example of early exposure to language and culture for young children.
Study Abroad and Minority Students

White students comprise only 60% of university enrollment, but 80% of study abroad participation according to The Seattle Times journalist Kathy Matheson. Minority students may face different challenges than white students when it comes to studying abroad. Many times minorities are unaware of the opportunity to study abroad (Matheson), or are afraid they will face discrimination and prejudice, according to an article, “Changing the Face of Study Abroad” by Ingrid Norton. In addition, programs may not address the specific needs of minorities or include their demographics in promotional material, making them feel that studying abroad is “reserved for white people” (Norton). The University of Pittsburgh found a solution to this problem when they increased the diversity of their employees. However, participation of black students rose by 15%.

Study Abroad and Gender

A study done in 2006-2007 by Elizabeth Redden, “Women abroad and men at home,” said more than 65% of study abroad participants were women. Females have historically represented study abroad, which can send the wrong message to many men. James M. Lucas, of Michigan State University, said, “Women were sent overseas to be culturally educated ladies who could entertain their husbands' business partners” (Fischer, 1). This historical process has perpetually made studying abroad a feminine act. It has been reported that with nearly 1,300 students studying abroad, women gain more from more culturally and linguistically than men (Fischer, 3). Further research could shed knowledge for programs to better serve the needs of males abroad.

Conclusion

Bi-sensibility benefits students’ individual, cultural and linguistic competence, and it consequently helps society. Studying abroad gives an opportunity to contemplate life outside of the usual limits and boundaries of their country, challenging opinions and teaching effective communication in uncomfortable circumstances. Although study abroad is not the only means by which a one can attain bi-sensibility, it conveniently incorporates language and culture in an academic setting. If programs address the current gaps in study abroad requirements and incorporate new ways to increase awareness, students might have a better chance of becoming bi-sensible citizens.

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