Study Abroad Education in New England Higher Education: A Pilot Survey

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Key words:
- Study Abroad
- Higher Education
- Community Colleges
- Study Abroad Providers
- New England
- Employability

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Abstract

Purpose
The purpose of this pilot study is to develop relevant questions for research by gaining an initial understanding of how the field of Study Abroad education is organizing itself within institution of higher education. The context is the growing numbers of students, demands and expectations made on Study Abroad programs.

Approach and Methodology
The survey was carried out by analyzing publicly available data and information, as it would be available to students, of all the accredited institutions of higher education within the six States of New England.

Findings
The findings confirm that albeit for Community Colleges, the vast majority of institutions offer Study Abroad programs. However this survey also revealed the important role providers are playing in offering generic programs to students from multiple institutions.

Research Limitations/implications
The findings call for further investigation into Institutional strategies concerning the choice of programs, particularly those involving providers who potentially imply loosing tuition and control over educational outcomes. Limitations are discussed suggesting the need to widen the geographical area studied as well as analyzing in more detail the Community College offerings that are not easily accessible with the methodology I used in this study. The findings also raise some questions and future avenues of research particularly in the area of examining the integration of generic Study Abroad programs within particular institutional and programmatic objectives. It is also suggested that further research is needed to better evaluate if/how Study Abroad programs are designed to capitalize on the employability advantage they offer to participating students when they enter the job market.

Original value
The number of US students participating in Study Abroad programs is expected to continue to grow and it seems these programs will become part of mainstream offerings in most institutions. Similar trends are observed in Europe between member states. Besides giving a broad overview of the current offerings, this pilot study principally reveals several important avenues for future research that should help institutions in their choices of programs and the orientation they give to Study Abroad.
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1) Introduction

Study abroad programs are reported to be a vital component of the strategic vision of many colleges and universities (Ayoubi and Massoud, 2007). The growth of these programs in the USA is remarkable where the number of students studying abroad has risen from 84,000 to 220,000 in the last decade (NAFSA, 2008; MCB, 2007).

Initially Study Abroad programs were attracting small numbers of students seeking adventure but also prepared to engage and invest themselves in the experience (Schroth and Cormack, 2000). However the picture is changing, as it is now becoming an important mainstream component of the higher education environment. The numbers of students participating in these programs is growing as Study Abroad is therefore becoming available to a wider student population. In 2005 the Lincoln Commission (Bipartisan commission, 2005; Marcus, 2007) appointed by Congress, recommended that the number of US students studying abroad should reach 1 million with the next 10 years.

The Lincoln Commission’s (ibid) recommendations stress that the United States of America’s national interests are at stake. The chair of the commission, Peter McPherson, declares that American students need to experience living and studying overseas to be prepared to work and live in a global socio-economic and political context. The democratization of these programs and their broad appeal calls for a better understanding of the underpinning rational for offering these programs and the means used to achieve these ambitious objectives.

The USA is not alone in recognizing the importance of student mobility. In the UK Ayoubi & Massoud (2007) report that 74% of UK Universities have an International dimension in their mission and three quarter of these institutions are pursuing proactively their goals. The British Council is a government appointed agency specifically funded to support institutions in this area, the emphasis in this case being to foster incoming student and scholar traffic to import cultural diversity and tuition revenue. Similarly, Bellstrom (2007) notices the interest of overseas universities incoming to the USA to recruit students to “import” tuition revenue and diversity in the classroom.

The European Union took a different more open view when it developed the Erasmus-Socrates programs. These programs promote student mobility within the European Union to foster cultural immersions and exchanges that are aimed at creating a better understanding and increased interaction between member states. From a modest 3,244 outgoing students in the academic year 1987-88 the numbers have grown to 154,421 outgoing students in the academic year 2005-06 (Europa, 2007).

Study Abroad programs have therefore definite cultural, economic and academic benefits; they are now also recognized as giving students better chances in the employment market. Interesting findings about the impact of the Erasmus-Socrates European student mobility program were published in 2006 (Europa, 2006) that support
This research carried out by the European Commission revealed that 60% of students participating in the program increased their employability. Some 50% of these respondents attributed this positive outcome to increased language skills alone. In the same study 50% of the European labor market representatives confirmed that students participating in these programs are more readily employed in international positions.

Friedman (2007) argues that economic, technological and social changes are creating a worldwide level playing field that require a totally new set of skills from future employees. To survive in this new order, Friedman advocates the need to change some goals in education and make students more “globally” aware. In support for his views, a survey conducted for the Association of American Colleges found that 60% of the employers surveyed said that recently graduated students did not have the skills to succeed in a global economy (Fisher, 2007). Study Abroad may help this situation according to Reginald (2007) who reports that these programs increase the students’ chance on the job market. This is particularly relevant because students are increasingly choosing programs with labor market motives in mind (Maringe, 2006). The Lincoln Commission (ibid) mentioned earlier also recognizes the relation between employability and attending a Study Abroad program because of the growing need for understanding the world economically, politically, culturally and socially.

Understandably, one of the key recommendations of the Commission (ibid) is therefore to democratize Study Abroad by increasing the diversity of students, widening the list of host countries and, developing programs in community colleges as well as those aimed at low income families. Berotte (2007) and Teague (2007) have found that Community Colleges are increasingly promoting Study Abroad programs although they face obvious funding challenges.

The rising cost of study abroad is a critical issue many students and institutions are facing. In the 2006 State of the Field Survey carried out by the Forum on Education Abroad (2006) 68% of respondents reported rising costs as a major issue. Brustein (2007) mentions “financing” as one of major challenges facing colleges and universities as the demand for study abroad is rising. Similar concerns have been identified in Europe (Europa, 2006) where some 50% of participating students found it difficult from a personal financial perspective. This has a direct impact on attracting students from lower income households albeit that the European Union seems to be taking effective steps (Europa, 2006) and that the Lincoln Commission mentioned earlier recognizes this problem and identified the need to help community colleges and low-income families that cannot afford such programs.

This short review helps establish three important interwoven trends; the first is the broad positive impact of Study Abroad programs on student’s employability ultimately being very important. The second is the need to open access to these programs to a wider student population and the third is the threat posed by their rising cost. Given the importance of these questions I wanted to explore in more detail how the field of “study abroad” was organizing itself, how many institutions offer study abroad programs using which means. Gaining some idea of the way in which institutions are operating would in
turn lead to further exploration into the relevance and purpose of current study abroad offerings in the light of the trends mentioned above.

2) Pilot survey

To gain some understanding of how the field is organized I conducted a pilot survey of Higher Education Institutions in the six New England States of the USA. The survey was carried out in April 2008 examining the offerings of 195 institutions using the membership roster of the Commission Institution of Higher Education (CIHE) of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC). This membership represents all accredited institutions of higher education in the six New England states. For the purpose of this survey I excluded 39 institutions that had no reason or potential to offer study abroad programs such as Military Academies, Seminaries and professional institutions offering post-graduate programs to working adults. Information was gathered through publications, web sites and phone interviews. This method has the heuristic value of analyzing the information, as it would be available to students looking for study abroad opportunities within these institutions. It also has some limitations that will be discussed later but it does offer data on practically all study abroad programs offered in the region which a questionnaire based approach might not have done.

The survey’s purpose is to gain some understanding of the general trends and principal means institutions are using to offer study abroad programs to their students. The raw data\(^1\) I collected needed to be sorted and categorized. Jenkins (2007) observes that Study Abroad programs can be divided into three categories. The first two are programs developed as “one to one” relations between institutions and programs developed through partnerships with a host institution. The third category is made up of institutions that offer programs run by study abroad providers. The data I obtained revealed one more relevant category for the aims of this pilot study, namely overseas programs managed by the home institution itself. Similarly Tamar (2008) observes the increasing number of institutions opening “outposts” abroad.

The notion of provider remains debatable. In this category I have grouped educational institutions which have specialized in offering semester abroad programs to students from other institutions such as Butler College University consortiums, government sponsored programs such as Australearn and totally private “for profit” enterprises. The rationale for grouping them resides in the fact that they all offer programs to several institutions at the same time by running generic programs that are not designed to meet an individual institutional or departmental mission or goal. In other words, students from several colleges and universities may attend the same provider’s program at the same time which is fundamentally different from specifically designed programs offered within the confines of a bilateral agreement or those offered within a home institution campus abroad.

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\(^{1}\) Raw data is available upon request from the author.
Using these categories (and) with the aim of gaining a better understanding of the kind of programs offered, I have sorted the data into three categories. The first category groups programs offered through partnerships with individual universities abroad, the second groups programs offered abroad that are operated abroad by the home institution and the third are programs offered to students using study abroad providers.

The first observation one has to make is that from the total 42 community colleges present in the region only 5 appear to offer study abroad opportunities to their students. However the information I could gather from visiting Community College websites and talking with people on the phone was scarce. Therefore one would need to conduct further in-depth interviews with each institution to validate these results. For example, in two cases I found out about study abroad programs offered in Community Colleges through personal relations, indicating that there might be more active initiatives within the colleges than what appears in official publications or publicly released information. Nevertheless in comparison with the rest of the field, this category of institutions clearly did not offer students many visible opportunities to engage in study abroad programs.

Excluding the Community Colleges mentioned above, the field I surveyed consisted of 153 institutions of higher education. Twenty-five of these did not offer study abroad programs and fifteen had no information available on study abroad. I found that one hundred and thirteen institutions offered study abroad programs in the region representing 73% of the total surveyed. Given the general development of study abroad programs mentioned earlier in this article these results tend to support the idea that Study Abroad is present in a large majority institutions within this region.

Moving onto analyzing the channels used by these institutions table one shows the distribution of institutions offering Study Abroad programs using the categories mentioned earlier.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offering study abroad</th>
<th>113</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Using partners</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have own programs</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using providers</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These findings support the conclusion that providers are being used by a majority of institutions. However, as it was mentioned earlier, this category groups providers that have different business models. Therefore I also looked at the distribution of providers within the group of institutions offering Study Abroad programs. Table 2 shows the numbers of programs offered by the principal providers bearing in mind that many institutions offer programs from several providers.
Table 2: Programs offered by providers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provider</th>
<th>Programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College Consortium for International studies</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council on International Educational Exchange</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butler College Center for Global Education</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Programs International</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Institute for Foreign Studies</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semester at Sea</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study in Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Study Abroad Consortium</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston University</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IES Abroad</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Student Exchange Programs</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Association of American College and University Programs in Italy</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danish Institute for Study Abroad</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Web page links for the Providers can be found in Appendix 1

The top 5 providers represent all the different categories of providers mentioned earlier indicating what appears to be no specific bias towards one or the other type of provider.

Interestingly of the 73 institutions using Providers, 43 rely on one provider, 6 use two and 24 use three or more providers. Therefore the field is relatively equally divided between institutions using a single provider and those using multiple providers. These two strategies call for more detailed investigation. Using the data I had collected this was not possible. For example, one might imagine that the total student population might warrant different approaches. I chose not pursue this question because I found that institutions had widely varying regulations allowing students access to Study Abroad. Therefore the total enrollment of a particular institution would not necessarily be relevant because it does not necessarily follow that equivalent proportions of students have access to Study Abroad programs between different institutions.

3) Discussion

The purpose of this pilot survey is to inform future avenues of study and the results -- pose some interesting questions regarding institutional strategies and policies.

This exploratory survey would suggest that universities and colleges in the New England region rely heavily on providers and 41% use several of them. Market forces alone would suggest that their presence in so many institutions offering is a testimony of their success. However this survey did not determine the volume of students by category of study abroad and/or provider.

The apparent success these organizations are enjoying warrants some further investigations if only because of the potential influence they might have on Study Abroad market offerings in general. The latter is indirectly supported by the tendency of students
to adopt a consumerist approach when choosing educational pathways (Maringue, 2006). In 2006, 53% of students surveyed by the Forum on Education Abroad (2007) perceived study abroad as a commodity rather than an experience requiring active personal engagement.

In 2008, NAFSA, the US national Association of International Educators published a report that contained specific recommendations for study abroad programs (NAFSA, 2008). Notions such as integration, oversight and the embedded nature of study abroad programs within an institution are central in these recommendations. In this light further investigation is also needed to examine how generic programs offered by providers such as those found in this survey participate and are integrated into the wider educational objectives of the home institution.

Lastly this survey’s limited geographic scope may need to expand. The Lincoln Commission mentioned earlier identified the important demographic imbalance in student attending study abroad programs. Institutes of Higher education in the New England region cannot pretend to offer a comprehensive picture of the US student population. Therefore further studies are needed to collect a wider sample of institution.

This survey also highlights the need to examine how the programs of different providers, partners and home institution support and capitalize on the increased “employability” of students who attend study abroad programs.

4) Conclusion

This pilot survey has shown that in the New England region the majority of institution of higher education offer study abroad programs and that providers are popular and well represented in these institution’s offerings. There appears to be a need to further investigate Community College study abroad programs however, initial data supports the idea that few offer such programs despite the demonstrated usefulness in terms of employability. Cost factors have been identified as a major barrier.

The pilot survey also raised important questions that would need further investigation. The first is to further investigate the degree of integration and oversight generic programs enjoy in relation to the home institutions’ academic life. The second is to widen the geographic area surveyed and the third is to examine what, if any, attention is given to developing the potential “employability” benefits students derive when coming back from study abroad experiences.

Lastly, the classification I used in this article fails to reveal the big differences between very pro-active institutions offering a lot of choice and support with those who provide limited support to study abroad programs. Surveying the New England colleges and U-universities I observed that in many cases “international departments” are coping with both incoming and outgoing students. The “incoming” international students obviously require a completely different set of services and support to the “outgoing” US students. The different approaches institutions appear to be taking in supporting and planning study
abroad will undoubtedly have a profound impact on the programs outcomes and attractiveness.

This pilot survey reveals some trends but more importantly very important questions that call for further investigation. Answers to these questions are vital for the success and value of Study Abroad programs as institutions plan their offerings and Study Abroad programs become more accessible and part of the ordinary educational landscape.
Appendix 1

URL’s of Providers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provider</th>
<th>URL</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Association of American College and University Programs in Italy</td>
<td><a href="http://www.aacupi.org/home-frameset.htm">http://www.aacupi.org/home-frameset.htm</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Institute for Foreign Studies</td>
<td><a href="http://www.aifsabroad.com/">http://www.aifsabroad.com/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Programs International</td>
<td><a href="http://www.academicintl.com/">http://www.academicintl.com/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study in Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific</td>
<td><a href="http://www.australearn.org/">http://www.australearn.org/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston University</td>
<td><a href="http://www.bu.edu/abroad/">http://www.bu.edu/abroad/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butler College Center for Global Education</td>
<td><a href="http://www.butler.edu/cge/">http://www.butler.edu/cge/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Consortium for International studies</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ccisabroad.org/">http://www.ccisabroad.org/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danish Institute for Study Abroad</td>
<td><a href="http://www.dis.dk/">http://www.dis.dk/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IES Abroad</td>
<td><a href="https://www.iesabroad.org/IES/home.html">https://www.iesabroad.org/IES/home.html</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Student Exchange Programs</td>
<td><a href="http://www.isep.org/">http://www.isep.org/</a></td>
</tr>
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<td>Semester at Sea</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Study Abroad Consortium</td>
<td><a href="http://usac.unr.edu/usac/default.aspx">http://usac.unr.edu/usac/default.aspx</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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