

Comparing the intensity of student attitude and perception changes from short-term travel courses

Scott Ballantyne
Alvernia University

Robert Gannon
Pace University

Beth Berret
Alvernia University

Mary Ellen Wells
Alvernia University

ABSTRACT

Globalization is a pervasive phenomenon that impacts the personal and professional lives of individuals worldwide. Jeff Steagall, director of the University of North Florida's International Business program, believes that it has become necessary for individuals to understand and appreciate the uniqueness and value of foreign peoples and cultures, so they can function effectively in the new global milieu (Bull, 2009). Increasing numbers of college students opt for a study abroad experience as part of their college education (Anonymous, 2009). Most studies investigate long-term program models. However, short-term foreign travel has been shown to have positive effects on students (Dekaney, 2008; Lenz & Wister, 2008), especially in the areas of linguistic awareness, cross-cultural perspectives, attitudinal reflection and student perception of academic skill development (Zamastil-Vondrova, 2005). Additionally, research implies that short-term study abroad is valuable to a college student's overall academic success (Lenz & Wister, 2008). Although studies have been conducted to show the efficacy of short-term travel abroad, there have been no studies that investigate whether these benefits have become more or less pronounced over time. The authors utilize survey-based research from 2001 and 2010 that measure the effect of short-term study abroad on attitude, awareness and cross-cultural perceptions to determine whether the impact of short-term travel abroad has increased or decreased. Based on this preliminary evidence, propositions for further research are offered, and possible implications for college educators developing or modifying study abroad programs are suggested.

Keywords: International, education, study abroad, diversity, perception, cultures.

INTRODUCTION

An educational travel component can greatly improve and enhance a student's understanding of global issues and events. Additionally, research indicates a significant change in a student's perception of different cultures, post-sojourn (Dekaney, 2008). Much of this research has centered on long-term models, but there is an increasing body of evidence that short-term program models elicit similar, positive results (Lenz & Wister, 2008). Indeed, many students believe that short-term international study was a transformational life experience. Certainly, those who engage in short-term international travel courses are exposed to social, economic, cultural and political realities different from their home country.

In addition to the transformative aspects for the student, it is becoming apparent that employers in a variety of fields value the international education experience of prospective candidates (Anonymous, 2007), and foreign study experience has a significant impact on participant's careers (Norris & Gillespie, 2009). Acker and Scanes (2000) found that multinational corporations look favorably on candidates who have studied abroad because of their better understanding of diversity. These changes in employer orientation have not gone unnoticed by students, who are increasingly looking for learning experiences that will give them an edge over other job candidates and enhance their marketability (Bull, 2009; Relyea, Cocchiara, & Studdard, 2008).

Further, the ubiquity of globalization reinforces the need for an international perspective and a more intrinsic understanding of foreign people and culture. In the past, study abroad was seen by some as a social experience, and secondarily as an educational experience. However, students increasingly recognize the value of international education and the opportunity it presents for enhancing cross cultural skills (Kitsantas, 2004). This awareness creates an orientation toward maximizing the cultural and attitudinal benefits of study abroad.

The purpose of this study is to build upon an initial study completed in 2003 and subsequently published in *Multicultural Review* in December 2003 as an article entitled "Teaching Cultural and Racial Understanding Through International Travel Courses: Student Perceptions Through Travel to Cuba:" (Ballantyne, 2003). To enhance the study a longitudinal design was utilized to examine the attitudes of three different samples of students: graduate students who completed a short-term study abroad course to Cuba in 2001 and graduate and undergraduate students who completed a short-term study abroad course to Italy in 2008 and a separate group of undergraduate and graduate students that completed a short-term study abroad course to Italy in 2010. Their responses will be compared to students who have not participated in a short-term travel abroad program. Both international travel course destinations exposed students to cultural differences existing between the U.S. and a foreign country with a different political system and economic delivery system. Student itineraries included both pre-arranged programs and free time to experience the culture and interact with the respective country's citizens. In the case of Cuba, students were required to make a presentation about their experiences to selected audiences. In the case of Italy, students were required to submit a journal and a research paper reflecting on their experience.

DATA COLLECTION

Participants

Data was collected from graduate students at Alvernia University after a study abroad trip to Cuba in March, 2001. Students were enrolled in business administration, education and liberal studies masters programs. Of the 40 eligible students, 38 participated in the survey, yielding a response rate of 95%. Of the 38 participants, 30 students were seeking an MBA from the Business Department, 7 were seeking an MED from the Education Department and 1 was seeking a MALS from the Arts and Sciences Division. Additionally data was collected from graduate students at Alvernia University after a study abroad trip to Italy in January 2008 and January 2010. A control group was established at the time of the Cuba data collection and the Italy data collection from students with similar educational backgrounds at Alvernia University.

Survey

Data was collected through the use of a Likert-scale questionnaire. Student attitudes toward their education experience were evaluated, and, in addition, attitudes about racial tolerance were analyzed. The data was collected through a survey entitled “The Effects of International Travel Courses on Student Understanding of Global and Racial Issues Survey”. Part of the survey was designed to collect preliminary information from the respondents, including academic level and degree pursued. Additionally, students indicated whether or not they had participated in a study abroad program or not. Those who did not participate were used as a control group.

The next section of the survey included eight (8) Likert-scale statements designed to obtain data about student perceptions. Students had five choices that were valued from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). The following eight statements were posed for consideration by all respondents”

- I have been exposed to cultural differences that exist between countries with differing economic and political differences. (cultdiff)
- I have had a life changing experience by completing my undergraduate/graduate program at Alvernia University. (lifechan)
- I have had my views on race relations altered by completing my undergraduate/graduate program at Alvernia University. (viewrace)
- I enjoy interacting with people of different cultures. (interact)
- Cuba/Italy is a country with harsh conditions. (harshcon)
- Cuba/Italy is a complete economic and political failure. (failure)
- An international travel component should be required in the Alvernia University undergraduate/graduate programs. (travcomp)

The fourth section of the survey included two Likert-scale statements to be responded to only if the individual participated in one of the two designated international travel course destinations. The questions were:

- The longer I was in Cuba/Italy, the more comfortable I felt with the people of other cultures. (comfort)
- This course changed my perception of the world. (percepti)

The final section of the survey allowed respondents the opportunity to express comments or concerns regarding international studies within Alvernia University's undergraduate and graduate programs. This qualitative data was collected, summarized and reported in the results section of this paper.

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study was designed as a relationship study. The primary purpose of a relationship study is to identify the causes and effects of important phenomena. This type of research design is especially useful for exploratory studies (Borg & Gall, 1989). The research design allows the analysis of the relationship between several variables simultaneously, and results are reported even though there may or may not be any theoretical basis to justify their inclusion (Borg & Gall, 1989). The analysis of the data will be explained for those relationships that are significant at the .95 confidence level (Matlack, 1993).

Statistical Procedures

The data was tested utilizing the SPSS software package (SPSS). Statistical procedures used included means, one-way ANOVA, correlation, and Chi-square. These statistical procedures provided the basis for determining significance and answering the questions associated with the study. All responses were tested at the .95 confidence level.

Significant differences in the perception of international populations, economies and governments were evaluated to determine if pre-conceived biases are lessened through short-term study abroad courses.

Racial prejudices are largely the result of disinformation and may be seriously altered through the type of contact and familiarity that occurs during short-term international travel courses. Student exposure to racial and ethnic differences in an international setting may enhance understanding in the United States as well.

RESULTS

Frequencies, means and standard deviations for the survey questions were compiled. Additionally, the Likert-scale questions were subjected to One-way ANOVA analysis based on the selected independent variables to determine if significant differences existed in the data. A correlation analysis was completed on the variables to determine if significant relationships exist between variables. Finally, a Chi-square test was completed on the two variables that were only answered by students who participated in the international travel course. All data is presented in the following tables regardless of their level of significance.

Data

Table one summarizes the frequency and descriptive statistics compiled from the data. The descriptive statistics indicate that the majority of students agree or strongly agree that they have been exposed to cultural differences. This is the same for both the study abroad attendees as well as the members of the control group that did not participate in a short-term study abroad

program. Additionally, the data indicates that both travel abroad attendees and the members of the control group believe that they have had a life-changing experience during their collegiate career. With regard to student views on race and ethnicity, a statistically significant number of students surveyed responded that they had no opinion (choice 3) to the question of whether their views on race had been altered. This is true when the Cuba trip and the Italy trip are considered separately as well. Enjoying interactions with people of different cultures yielded the highest scores of any category by the members of the Cuba trip, the Italy trip and the members of the control group. There seemed to be ambivalence among the three groups as to whether a short-term study abroad trip should be a mandatory degree component. The students who participated in travel courses overwhelmingly felt more comfortable with people of other cultures, presumably from spending time immersed in that culture. Finally, students who participated in the short-term study abroad experience responded with agree or strongly agree to the statement that the experience changed their world perspective.

Table 1

Frequency and descriptive statistics compiled from data collected regarding the impact of international travel courses on student attitudes

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
Degree Field	N/A	N/A	108	9	2	7	3	3
Academic Level	1.32	.47	92	43				
Travel Course	1.58	.50	57	78				
Country	1.72	.45	38	97				
Year of Travel	2.04	.82	39	43	53			
Cultural Differences	4.11	.99	1	14	12	50	58	
Life Changing	3.77	.99	2	13	36	47	37	
Views on Race	3.42	.93	4	15	50	52	14	
Interactions	4.49	.58	0	0	6	57	72	
Travel Component	3.39	1.23	8	31	26	40	30	
Comfortable*	4.35	.92	1	2	2	16	25	
Perceptions*	4.41	.75	0	2	1	19	24	

Note: n=137; *n=46

Key: Degree; 1 bus, 2 ed, 3 lib, 4 nur, 5 cj, 6 math; Country; 1 cuba, 2 italy; Level; undergrad 1, grad 2; yes 1, no 2; SA 5 SD 1.

A one-way ANOVA was performed on selected dependent variables to determine if significant differences occurred between students at different degree levels. The f-ratio, based on whether a student was an undergraduate or graduate student was significant across several variables. The score for graduate students was significantly higher, with the exception of the variable measuring views on race and ethnicity. The responses to the race variable showed no significance when considered as a whole, and no significance when undergraduate and graduate students were considered separately. (See Table 2 Below)

Table 2

A one-way ANOVA comparing means of selected dependent variables based on collegiate academic level.

	Cultural Differences	Life Changing	Views on Race	Interaction with Others	Travel Component
F-ratio	23.51**	53.84**	2.47	13.14**	13.18**
Means					
Undergrad	3.85	3.40	3.34	4.37	3.14
Graduate	4.67	4.56	3.60	4.74	3.93

Note: n=137; **p<.01

Comparison of selected dependent variables on the impact of short-term study abroad courses on participants versus non-participants yielded statistically significant results. The f-ratios indicated that participants had significantly higher scores than non-participants on the variables: cultural differences, life changing, interaction with others and whether a travel component should be a required part of the curriculum. As in the other test conducted, views on race were not statistically significant. (See Table 3 Below)

Table 3

A one-way ANOVA comparing means of selected dependent variables based on academic travel course participation.

	Cultural Differences	Life Changing	Views on Race	Interaction with Others	Travel Component
F-ratio	50.12**	23.86**	13.91**	17.20**	18.66**
Means					
Participated	4.72	4.23	3.75	4.71	3.89
Non-participant	3.67	3.44	3.18	4.32	3.03

Note: n=137; **p<.01

The impact of the travel courses were compared based on the country that the short-term study abroad course visited. The results indicate that travel to Cuba had a greater impact on students than the travel to Italy course. However, these results may be skewed because the students that visited Cuba were exclusively graduate students, while the majority of students that visited Italy were undergraduate students. (See Table 4 Below)

Table 4

A one-way ANOVA comparing means of selected dependent variables based on a country.

	Cultural Differences	Life Changing	Views on Race	Interaction with Others	Travel Component
F-ratio	17.89**	45.40**	1.05	10.18**	12.89**
Means					
Cuba	4.66	4.58	3.55	4.74	3.97
Italy	3.90	3.45	3.37	4.39	3.16

Note: N=137, **p<.01

A chi-square test was run to determine if a significant difference in world perspective and level of comfort was achieved by those who were part of the short-term study abroad programs and those who were not. There was a statistically significant difference, which suggests that those who participated had a greater change in their world perspective.

Table 5

A chi-square test of significance on student impact regarding their perspective of the world and level of comfort regarding people of other cultures based on the travel courses

	Perspective on the world	Level of comfort through immersion
Chi-square	35.91**	50.74**

Note: n=91; * p <.05, **p<.01

The chi-square result indicates a significant difference in the perspective of the world and the level of comfortable achieved by the students who participated in the travel course program. The students who participated believed the impact was of significant value.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study has attempted to gauge the results of short-term travel abroad courses on student views on race and ethnicity, cultural differences and different economic and political systems. Additionally, it has attempted to measure the impact that short-term travel abroad courses have on students' overall educational experience. The results support the suggestion by Lenz and Wister (2008) and Zamastil-Vondrova (2005) that short-term travel abroad can be beneficial to students and may be a viable alternative to longer study abroad programs. This study examines the effects of short-term travel abroad programs to Cuba and Italy, and adds to Dekaney's (2008) study of the effects of a short-term study abroad to Brazil, and Lenz and

Wister's (2008) study of short term effects of short-term study to Guatemala and Belize. Consideration of these studies would suggest that short-term travel abroad programs are valuable regardless of the country or region visited.

One of the most interesting results from the study indicates that travel abroad attendees' view on race and ethnicity was unchanged by their experience. This was true for both graduate and undergraduate travel abroad attendees. This may have occurred because of social desirability bias. Social desirability bias is the tendency for respondents to answer questions in a socially acceptable way. Although this tendency varies from person to person, social desirability bias is more likely to occur when items address personal feelings, or are socially sensitive in nature (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Futing, 2004). It can be suggested that participants answered in a way that belied any previously held negative views on race and ethnicity because such answers would not be socially acceptable. Similarly, social desirability bias may have played a role in the responses to a short-term study abroad trip being a life changing experience. After incurring the expense and time to study abroad, participants might wish to justify their participation with an affirmative response. Subsequent research should attempt to control for the affect of social desirability bias in the research design.

The results may be specific to students at Alvernia University. Alvernia is a small, Catholic university with a strong Franciscan heritage. Students may be attracted to Alvernia because of its commitment to Franciscan values. This may have skewed the results, so further research utilizing samples from different universities would be necessary before the results can be generalized.

The short-term study abroad experience profoundly affected both graduate and undergraduate students when compared to the control group. This suggests that short-term study abroad programs are valuable for both graduate and undergraduate students. However, to a statistically significant degree, the impact of the study abroad experience was stronger for graduate students than undergraduate students. Although consideration of these differences is outside the scope of this study, further research on these differences might yield valuable insight into the design of short-term study abroad programs.

There has been limited research investigating short-term travel abroad programs. With increasing education costs, short-term study abroad programs allow more students to participate in a meaningful life changing experience. This study enhances the extant literature by confirming the results of previous studies on the efficacy of short-term travel abroad programs, and shows that these programs have remained effective. However, the scope of the study was limited to the effects on participants and does not address the specific elements of short-term programs that drive these effects. Further research needs to address what elements should be included in short-term study abroad programs to maximize the student experience.

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