

Graduate Learning Experiences and Outcomes



The Landscape of Graduate International Experiences: 2014 Research Report

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Summary

This research report presents findings from the Graduate Learning Experiences and Outcomes (GLEO) two-part study: The Landscape of Graduate Study Abroad. The first part of the study presents data collected from a survey of faculty-led international experiences for graduate and professional students at 15 research universities in the Midwest and New York. Responses include a total of 172 programs. The primary goal of the survey is to understand, document, and develop a taxonomy of international study programs offered at the graduate level. The second part of the study seeks to understand how students process their experience abroad. Data were collected from in-depth interviews of MSU College of Education doctoral students who participated in overseas programs in Botswana, China, Cyprus, and Vietnam.

Findings

Results of the survey reveal that most programs target graduate students enrolled in masters, doctoral and/or other degree programs. The majority of graduate level international programs are short-term (less than 4 weeks), and tend to be interdisciplinary, offered for academic credit and do not have a foreign language requirement. The top destinations are Europe (France, Germany, and Italy), the Americas (Brazil) and Asia (China). Most programs include a combination of cultural excursions, lectures and presentations, academic field trips/site visits, and group discussions. Faculty program leaders represent a wide variety of disciplines and have diverse motivations for leading international graduate programs. Institutions responsible for leading international graduate programs need to consider ways to encourage and support faculty leading these programs, and ways to integrate the overseas experiences of students and faculty into curricula. More research needs to be done to discover how students process their international experience. The GLEO team offers one method of exploring these experiences through in-depth qualitative interviews with doctoral students who participated in College of Education overseas programs. Results indicate that students experience a range of personal, academic, and professional outcomes, sometimes resulting in self-reflection and transformation of values, perspectives, and behaviors.

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Introduction to the GLEO Project

As the world becomes an increasingly interconnected global community, it is essential that today's graduate students develop international perspectives and the ability to work with others in diverse settings. To help address this need, many professional schools and graduate programs in the U.S. are creating international experiences for their students, ranging from short-term, faculty-led programs to joint and dual degree programs.

Unlike undergraduate study abroad, graduate students have different goals and purposes for engaging in international experiences and tend to seek opportunities for research, networking, personal growth, and other professional development. There is, however, a dearth of research information available on graduate study abroad. The only national report available is through the annual Open Doors publication. In this report, the data are lumped together into a few categories. While the data provided in this report provide some sense of graduate study abroad, the data are not carefully vetted. Little research or information exists that focuses on the design, experiences, and outcomes of international opportunities at the graduate level. Given the paucity of information available, such interests create substantial challenges for programs seeking to develop effective international experiences for their graduate students.

The Graduate Learning Experiences and Outcomes (GLEO) project addresses this gap in research by exploring the landscape of international opportunities offered at the graduate level. To begin to understand these opportunities, the GLEO team focused on faculty-led, group experiences. A survey was administered to 15 research universities in the Midwest and New York, with the goal of building a taxonomy of faculty-led programs available to graduate and professional students. The GLEO project also seeks to understand how graduate and professional students process the international experience once they return to the U.S. Through interviews with doctoral students participating in faculty-led international programs provided by MSU's College of Education, the GLEO team collected data on personal, professional, and academic outcomes. The following report highlights key findings from both the survey and student interviews.



Objectives and Outcomes

- Create a comprehensive taxonomy of graduate level faculty-led international programs.
- Document models, and curricular and pedagogical approaches utilized by programs.
- Identify learning outcomes associated with graduate international study programs.

Part I: The CIC-NYU Survey of Faculty-Led International Experiences

Between 2011 and 2013, the GLEO team developed and distributed an online survey to capture faculty-led abroad experiences for graduate and professional students at 15 research universities. Faculty and administrators overseeing these programs were asked to provide information about learning objectives, activities, target audiences, academic disciplines, destinations, and logistics. Survey responses were supplemented by an extensive web search of each university conducted by GLEO team members. Responses include a total of 172 faculty-led programs at the graduate level.

This report is organized around six questions that framed the study: 1) Who is going abroad?; 2) Where are they going?; 3) How are the programs structured?; 4) Why are they going and what are they doing?; 5) Who is leading the program and why?; and 6) How do students process the experience?

Participating Institutions:

Indiana University
Indiana University-Purdue University
Indianapolis
Michigan State University
New York University
Northwestern University
Ohio State University
Pennsylvania State University
Purdue University
University of Chicago
University of Illinois
University of Iowa
University of Michigan
University of Minnesota
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Who is going abroad?

To understand who is going abroad, we used the following categories:

- The program's target audience or intended participants.
- Degree level of graduate students.
- Discipline of graduate students.

Survey results reveal a diverse set of international opportunities available to graduate and professional students in an array of academic disciplines.

Program's Target Audience

Close to half the programs target graduate students only (52%), while the remaining programs (48%) welcome a combination of advanced undergraduates and graduate students (see Figure 1).

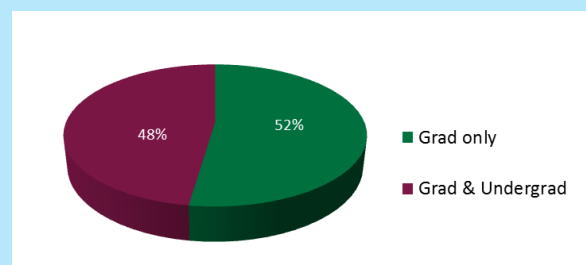


Figure 1. Program Target Audience. (Does not include 21 non-responses.)

Who is going abroad?

Degree Level

When looking at the degree level of participants, approximately half of the programs target some combination of masters, doctoral and other degree programs (e.g. certificate and other). The remaining programs target masters students only (34%), doctoral students only (12%), or certificate only (1%).

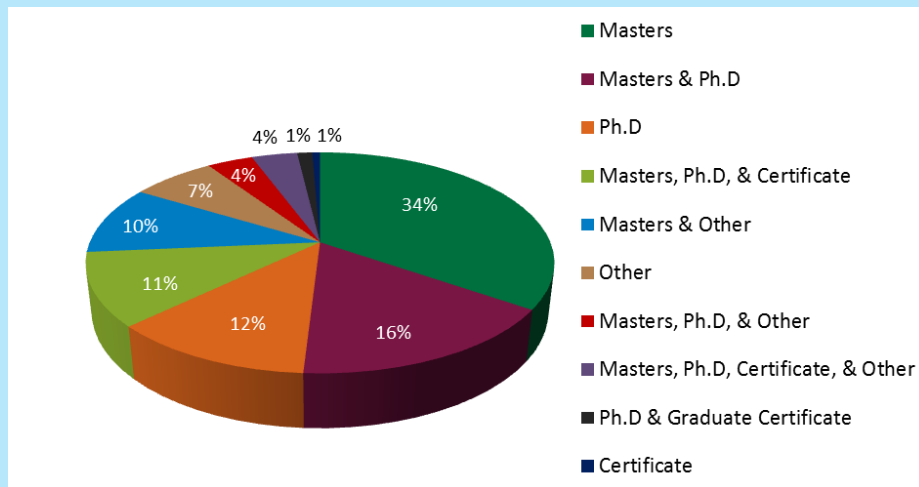


Figure 2. Degree Level of Target Audience. (Does not include 13 non-responses.)

Participant Discipline of Study

The graduate programs in the survey tend to target students from a wide range of academic disciplines, with 60 programs accepting students from multiple disciplines. Responses from the faculty survey indicate that interdisciplinary curricula and activities are integral to the learning outcomes of their programs. Each academic discipline was counted individually with the top 10 results shown below in Figure 3. Health professions, social sciences, business/management, humanities, and education have the strongest showing.

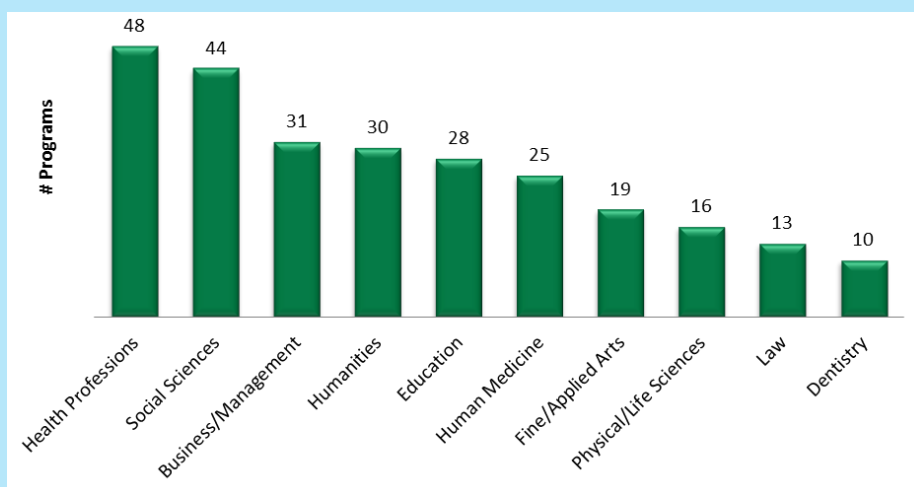


Figure 3. Top 10 Participant Discipline of Study.



Where are they going?

Top Destinations

To understand where faculty-led programs are going, we analyzed data by program destination and world region. Fifty-nine countries are represented in the data, with the top 10 shown below in Figure 4. Of the 172 programs examined, China was by far the top destination with 18 programs, nearly twice as many programs as France and Germany, the second top destination with 10 programs each. Brazil and Italy were the third most frequented destination with 9 programs each, followed by England with 8 programs, Argentina and South Africa with 7 programs, Japan with 6 programs, and Ghana and India with 5 programs each.



Figure 4. Top 10 Program Destinations.

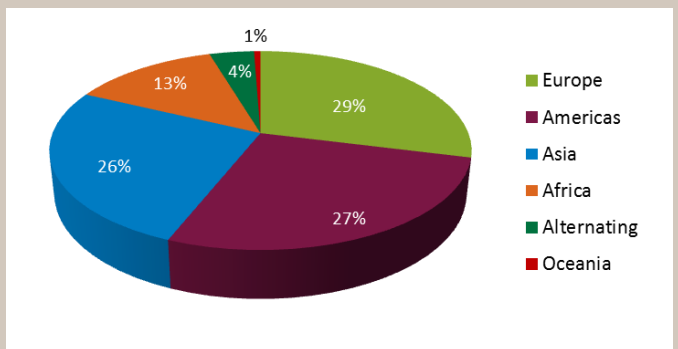


Figure 5. World Region. (United Nations' Classification)

Program Destination by World Region

Looking at programs in the survey by world region, we used the United Nations' geographical classification which consists of 5 regions: Europe, Americas, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. Europe had the greatest number of programs (50), followed closely by the Americas (47 programs) and Asia (45 programs). Approximately half as many programs (23) were in African countries, and one program in Oceania. Seven programs alternate countries and world regions annually.

How are the programs structured?

To find out how the programs are structured, the survey asked questions about program length, size of the group, whether or not the program was offered for academic credit, foreign language requirements, and funding sources. Respondents were also asked if their programs received any form of assistance from central study abroad offices.

74% spend 4 weeks or less in the host country

86% offer academic credit

73% receive assistance from their university's central study abroad office*

86% do not require foreign language competency*

*Assistance may include advertising, logistical planning, collecting student applications, or offering information about vaccinations and safety abroad.

*The few exceptions to this trend are Health Professions or Human Medicine programs that require students to collect personal and clinical information from patients. The majority of these programs require Spanish or Portuguese, with a few programs (one each) requiring Chinese, French, Bengali, or Swahili.

Funding Sources

- 57 programs report multiple funding sources
- 57% of programs expect students to contribute some or all of the costs
- 34% receive subsidies from their college, unit, or department
- 7% raise funds to offset student costs
- 1% are supported by an organization in the host country
- 1% receive subsidies from a central international education office

Number of Students Participating

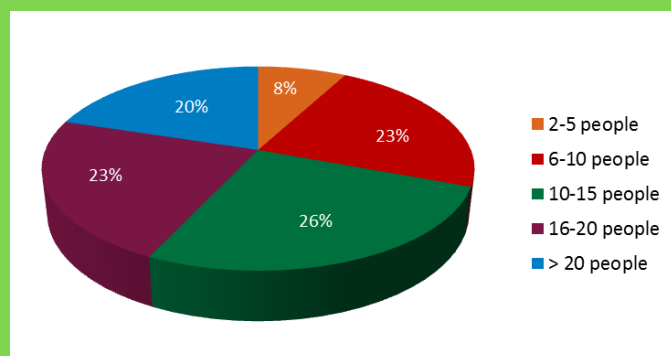


Figure 6. Size of Group Going Abroad. (Does not include 58 non-responses.)

What are they doing & why are they going?

Program Activities

As Figure 7 illustrates, graduate students participate in a wide range of activities while abroad, from cultural field trips to research, service and volunteer work. Responses to the survey represent 16 different activity types and all programs include multiple activities.

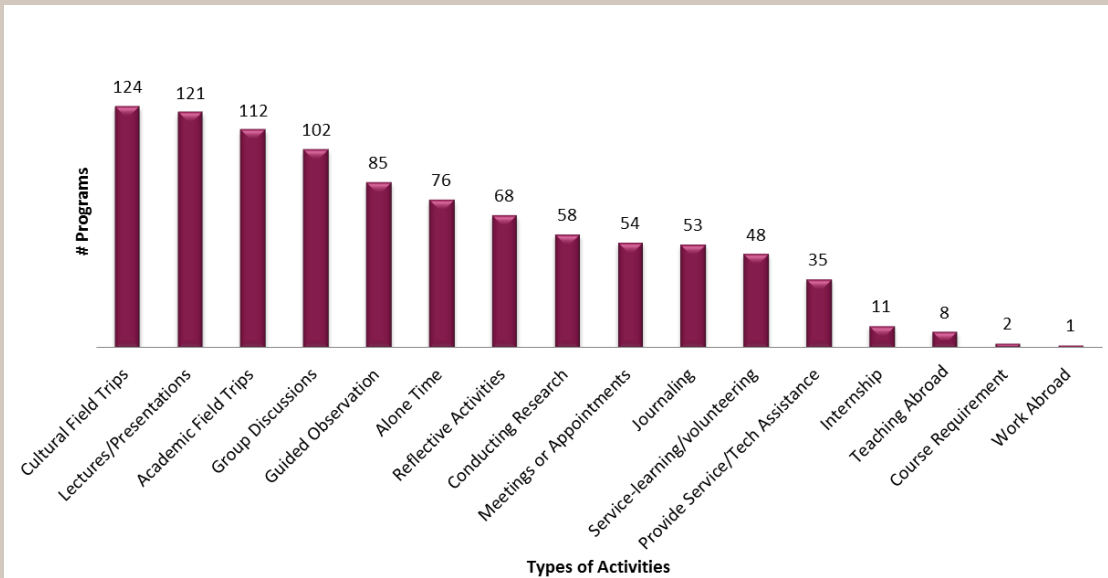


Figure 7. Types of Activities.

Program Lodging

While participating in the programs, most students are housed in local hotels or other tourist accommodations like bed and breakfasts (Figure 8). The remaining lodging types include dormitories, homestays, faculty or alumni owned houses, apartments, community housing, and campsites. Some programs use a combination of different types of housing.

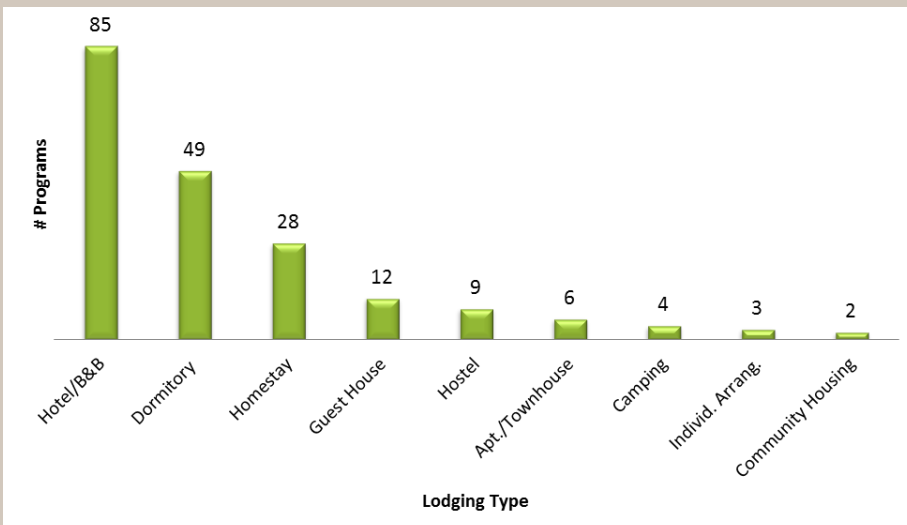


Figure 8. Program Lodging by Type.

What are they doing & why are they going?

When asked about the goals and purpose of the program, faculty responded with a variety of answers:



- Assist an underserved population
- Build culturally sensitive communication skills
- Community engagement
- Collaboration with international partners
- Cultural awareness
- Conduct individual research
- Faculty mentoring
- Leadership development
- Learn to handle ambiguous and uncertain situations
- Make students globally competitive
- Personal development
- Prepare students for careers in international development
- Professional development
- Teach students practical/applicable skills

Host Country Role

The majority of programs (74%) partner with organizations in the host country. Organizations include health clinics and hospitals, universities, businesses, and local non-profits. Eighty-seven percent of programs receive some kind of assistance in the host country. As Figure 9 illustrates, this assistance ranges from logistical planning and acting as translators, to co-leading programs.

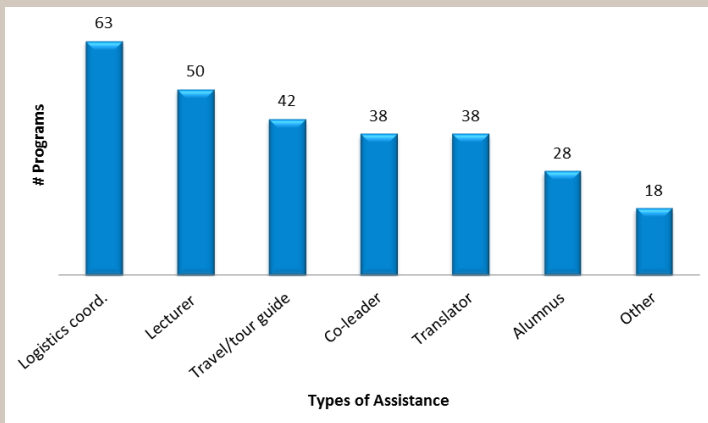
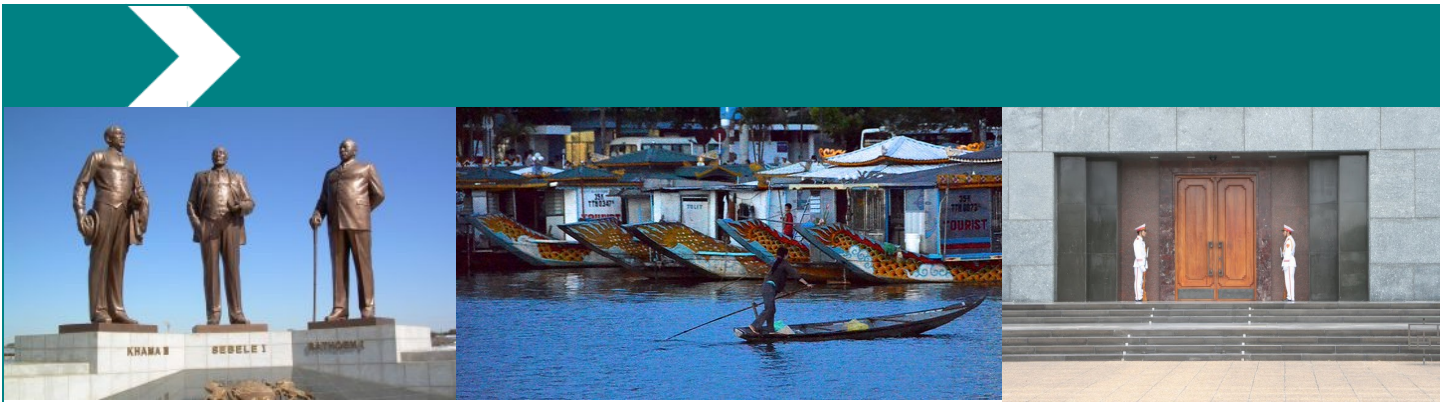


Figure 9. Type of Program Assistance by Host Country Personnel.



Who is leading the program and why?

Program Leader's Discipline

Similarly to graduate students going abroad, the faculty leading these programs represent 20 academic disciplines. The top 10 disciplines are highlighted in Figure 10. Most faculty leaders represent the social sciences (31 program leaders), business or management (28), health professions (22) and education (19).

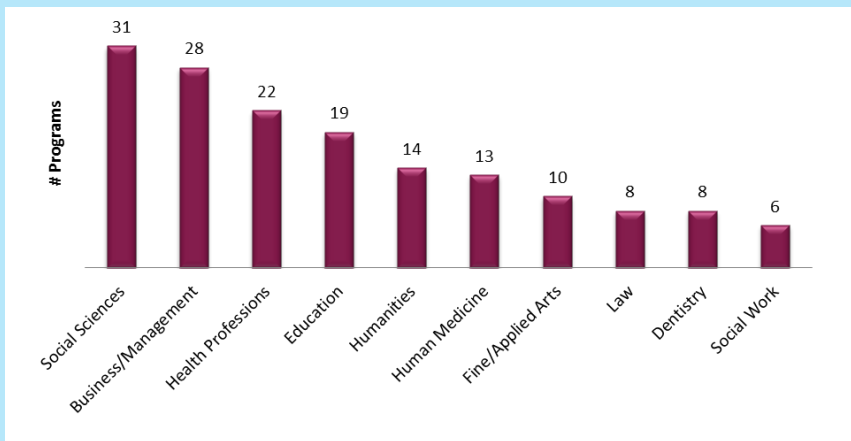


Figure 10. Top 10 Program Leader's Discipline.

Motivation for Leading Programs

When asked about their motivation for leading graduate study abroad programs, faculty responded with a variety of reasons:

- Collaboration with faculty abroad
- Create a global presence for the university
- Develop and cultivate relationships in the host country
- Develop global partnerships
- Develop students' global competencies
- Help students challenge their perceptions
- Help students prepare for international careers
- Increase the number of students going abroad
- Long-term experience in the region
- Passion for a particular region or population
- Promote service learning
- Share transformative experiences with students

How do students process this experience?

We asked survey respondents at all 15 institutions to provide information on pre and post program activities. However, a large number of non-responses and lack of such information on program websites prevented us from making any conclusions about the data. Overall, we believe that more work needs to be done to understand how students process their experiences once they return to the U.S.



Part II: Student Perceptions of Short-term, Faculty-Led Study Abroad Programs

In order to begin exploring how graduate students process their international experiences, the GLEO team piloted a qualitative study looking at student perceptions of graduate-level study abroad programs in the College of Education at Michigan State University. The program, called the Fellowship for Enhancing Global Understanding (FEGU), provides for a relatively unique model in study abroad that uses a fairly common framework within the College of Education to structure a set of three-week experiences for doctoral students across a variety of countries. While individual faculty members provide instructional and curricular leadership for these programs, the College provides a strong organizational context in which this planning and implementation occurs.

Participants consisted of doctoral students who went overseas on a FEGU experience in Botswana, China, Cyprus, or Vietnam. Each program had different education objectives. The Botswana program focused on the field of Kinesiology, with an emphasis on the role of athletics in child development. The China program focused mainly on elementary and secondary education, with some site visits to higher education institutions. The Cyprus program centered on peace education, with attention to advancing a mutual dialogue between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. Finally, the Vietnam program focused on educational reform and capacity building in K-12 and higher education throughout the country.

Participants ranged in age from 23 to 45 and represented 7 of the 12 doctoral programs in the College of Education: Education Policy; Higher, Adult and Lifelong Education; K-12 Administration; Kinesiology; Mathematics Education; School Psychology; and Teacher Education. There were 38 domestic and 14 international students. Students had mixed prior experiences abroad ranging from no experience to living abroad. Similarly, students had a mix of foreign language experience from beginner to fluent to bilingual.

Students were interviewed for 60-90 minutes post-abroad experience. Interviewers asked semi-structured questions about learning outcomes, impressions, meaningful experiences, interactions with the host population, interactions with fellow students, and program activities. In addition to collecting qualitative data on students' perceptions of their experiences, we also made use of two additional data collection instruments to ascertain potential outcomes associated with these experiences. Both the Intercultural Developmental Inventory (IDI) and the Beliefs, Events and Values Inventory (BEVI) were piloted with a subset of participants in this study. Neither of these instruments, however, performed in ways that were helpful to the goals of the study. We continue to seek acceptable instruments to assess potential outcomes of this program.



Why are graduate students participating in study abroad programs?

When asked why students chose to participate in the programs, most responded that the program aligned with their academic and professional interests. The majority expressed a desire or curiosity to learn “how things are done” in another culture:

“And what this study tour offered that I couldn’t get anywhere else is to be able to be right inside the educational institutions, right inside the colleges and universities...ultimately, I think I’d like to do my dissertation research in China.”—Student 23.11, China

“I guess at the very least I would hope to listen to some people who are elementary educators talk about their work and look at, you know, how they’re trained and try and...contrast some of the unexamined assumptions that I have about teaching elementary school with some of the unexamined assumptions that they have about teaching elementary school.”—Student 34.11, Vietnam

“The first one is, you know, as a social studies educator, I think this is really important to, to study other cultures and to portray that view, make your students more culturally aware and appreciative of the, of how other people view the world.”—Student 10.11, Botswana

How do these experiences impact their professional or academic life?

Students were asked to share what they perceived to be the major learning outcomes of their experiences in the study abroad programs:

“This China experience is what got me interested [in] the role government policies and practices play. Because I saw such a direct link there that it made me say, well, there has to be one in the US as well. And while we don’t have a federal system, you know, I still think that policies and procedures influence and play a role in education, in particular higher education. In particular, funding of higher education. So I mean, obviously that has had a profound impact.”—Student 10.12, China

“Because I think for teachers, be it pre-service teachers or leaders, seeing other schools and academic situations really changes your perspective when you come back to the school system that you’re in. [Be]cause we do a lot of great things here but I think we have a lot to learn from the people around us and we don’t always look at it. And we can read about it but until you really see it, you can’t really understand the philosophies behind what they do internationally.”—Student 1.12, Botswana

How do these experiences impact their personal life?

Some of the participants had deeply personal experiences overseas. Students making sense of their experiences in this manner emphasized the development of connections with faculty and students in the host country or connections and relationships with their fellow travelers.

“I felt that I, that I bonded in a special way with our safari tour guide, Option. And I don’t know that it was as much even a verbal thing as a spiritual connection...you meet people and you make connections and it was just, it was really lovely to, to make that type of a connection with someone thousands of miles away in another country, in another continent.”—Student 13.11, Botswana

“Somehow I got nominated to give our closing speeches on behalf of the university for both the students and the faculty there. And my big takeaway and just my own personal belief is that you’re only as good as the people around you. And really, the faculty at the university, the students there that we worked with were all, all really made that experience what it was...I don’t think we would’ve been able to get around to see the things we were able to see, to go the places we were able to go and to engage in the conversations with had without the faculty and students there to facilitate that.”—Student 21.11, China

“And of course, this 24/7 interaction with other people, there are 17 of us in the group and that like very intense interaction with them during the trip...you will see like the real he or the real she or the real me because we are in a way put physically and psychologically to deal with every situation that we have during the trip and that makes us like becoming, I think, many of us becoming very honest in presenting who we are to the group.”—Student 28.11, Vietnam

“And so those little gestures that the Chinese hosts were making toward me each time was, was so significant. You know, I couldn’t have had that had I been a typical tourist, right? The fact that we were given these connections through the program, I think, and given a lot of time to spend with these people over the period of two weeks, just even doing whatever felt we wanted to do. And didn’t have to be any formal thing. But that kind of really built those relationships in a way that was really, that was so...that was something that will stick with me forever.”—Student 16.11, China

Did this experience change the way students view themselves?

Students described opportunities for self-reflection that led to new or different ways of understanding their lives as doctoral students and as global citizens. These opportunities were often brought on by challenging or uncomfortable situations, leading students to question particular beliefs, perspectives and values that they hold.

“A couple people expressed concern over the fact that we had just gone in, almost as tourists, you know, to these people’s homes and just taken pictures, hung out a little bit and then left. And I just thought that was really interesting, you know, cuz I was kinda, I thought it was kinda weird, too. I didn’t, I didn’t take my camera into the houses and just start snapping pictures, like this is where these guys live. I don’t know how I feel about that...And so that was really, that really kinda just made me rethink, you know, why are we here and you know, what can we do for these people?”—Student 11.11, Botswana

“We are huge and loud and obnoxious people here. And we have a lot of expectation around what we deserve and what we don’t deserve. I mean, just, it hit me like a ton of bricks.”—Student 16.11, China

“That whole relationship of a researcher with a community that they research. Or place. And not being parasitic about it, being more symbiotic, if that makes sense. Right, that it’s not all about me taking and learning and then leaving. It’s about what I think responsible scholarship should be about is about learning from them, but then also bringing something that’s of benefit to them to the table as well so that it’s not a one way street.”—Student 34.11, Vietnam

“I think the study tour is just phenomenal. I think it challenged areas of myself that were blind spots, that I hadn’t seen. Whether it’s learning how to be more thoughtful or learning how to not need to...not need to be like validated or praised in situations. Like I just got to see kinda some of that fade away. And some of the things that I held as important in terms of like looking good just were not as important in this context. What was more important was being authentic.”—Student 8.11, China

“That, just questioning your self identity is, it changed all the ways you see yourself. Trying to understand why you shape out to be who you are and...that really made me see myself in a different way. It made me realize I’m still growing and maybe I still don’t know who I am.” —Student 25.11, China

I think it’s made me, it made me empathize with the transition that international students must go through, studying in America and coming to America and just, that sense of like feeling different and fumbling through language barriers and all these sort of barriers. So it made me definitely empathize with what it must be like to be an international student. And also being aware of like how Americans must seem on a national stage. Which is troubling for me.”—Students 11.12, Cyprus

Next Steps

Next Steps

Building on these studies, we are planning to:

- 1) Further study the learning that occurs in short-term study abroad experiences for graduate students and how we might deepen the learning within these experiences.
- 2) Study the influence of the disciplines on the nature and outcomes of short-term faculty-led study abroad experiences for graduate students.
- 3) Develop a methodology for the study and assessment of relevant outcomes associated with short-term faculty-led study abroad experiences for graduate students.
- 4) Initiate studies on experiences of students who engage individually in international experiences as part of their graduate studies.

We hope that, through these studies, we might be able to help foster deeper, more meaningful international experiences for graduate students at all levels and in all disciplines.

Acknowledgements

Participating Institutions:

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University of Chicago
University of Illinois
University of Iowa
University of Michigan
University of Minnesota
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
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