Learning for the global marketplace: Identifying factors that influence motivation for education abroad

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Abstract

Student motivation for education abroad is an area of important examination in the literature. This study, involving 388 students attending college for the first time, was conducted at a small private university in which increasing student engagement in global learning is part of its strategic plan. This study report, identifying differences in first-year students using the Global Perspectives Inventory between those electing and not electing into such opportunities, provides insight into the entering variables of first-year students that correlate with self-election and may inform this and other institutions on the critical perspectives that make a difference in motivation.

Introduction

Intercultural competence has become an important desired learning outcome for universities. Exposure to diverse cultures through participation in an experience abroad is one way in which students may develop this competence. As universities seek to increase student involvement in study abroad, the identification of barriers to participation and factors contributing to student motivation have become fruitful areas of research. This study will examine internal variables that may influence students' choice to engage in an abroad experience in which external barriers have been eliminated. Using the Global Perspectives Inventory, the study will analyze responses of first year college students from a small, private university and compare responses of those electing to apply for an abroad experience with those refraining from inclusion.

Problem for this Study

It is fundamentally understood that the global marketplace is increasingly interconnected and growing in both diversity and scale. That marketplace is comprised of businesses that value professionals educated and trained to navigate their way in the international environment and with varying cultural perspectives while conducting business abroad so as to realize the objectives of their organizations. Moreover, businesses also need employees able to function as expatriates. Such individuals must be able to generalize to the cultural setting in which they are engaged and utilize their cognitive and affective flexibility to effectively negotiate foreign territories, both mental and physical.

For many college students this means awakening to the likelihood of an ethnocentric mindset and transitioning from a mono-cultural life experience. Further, they must engage in learning opportunities that expose them to a culturally pluralistic global environment. Only through exposure to value

perspectives different from their own, what is known as culture shock, can one begin to open to a more ethnorelative worldview (Ogami, 1988). Consequently, many institutions of higher learning have taken up the goal of facilitating intercultural development in their students as part of cultivating educated individuals as well as for preparing professionals.

However, most ethnocentric individuals 'don't know what they don't know.' Institutions of higher education are challenged to build ways that overcome assumed barriers for cross-cultural learning and to facilitate acquisition of more culturally sensitive perspectives. While many institutions have launched varied programs, like short-term study abroad, to enable the most hesitant of students to participate, election into such programs is still problematic. Study abroad participation rates are steadily growing in the United States (US) but the proportion of US students studying abroad to the general college student population is insufficient for an expanding global marketplace. Learning abroad changes not only factual knowledge but also changes the affective developments necessary to gain the skill-set businesses seek in professionals able to navigate an international and complex cultural environment (Olson, Green and Hill, 2006).

The problem for this study is to identify if and what psychosocial variables influence college student election into global, cross-cultural learning opportunities when many structural inhibitors to participation have been eliminated. If such differences exist and can be identified between those electing into or out of learning abroad programs, perhaps additional instructional methods can be created to help awaken awareness of and overcome resistance generated by ethnocentric psychosocial inhibitors.

Literature Review

As local and global communities become ever more intertwined, finding effective ways of relating to one another is increasingly important (Kim, 2008). Universities are preparing future leaders and participants in a globalized milieu. This has implications for the skills and preparation those students will need to compete in a culturally diverse environment (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen & Hubbard, 2006; Hunter, White & Godbey, 2006; Kehl & Morris, 2007; Pederson, 2009). In the Lincoln Commission report (Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program, 2005), "What nations don't know can hurt them. The stakes involved in study abroad are that simple, that straightforward, and that important. For their own future and that of the nation, college graduates today must be internationally competent" (p. iv).

Intercultural competence is the ability to discern differences and interact appropriately across multiple contexts (Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman, 2003; Hunter et al., 2006) and is grounded in an attitude of respect, openness and tolerance (Deardorff, 2008). Developing intercultural competence includes not only cognitive and psychological skills but also external abilities in communication and behavior (Deardorff, 2006; Hunter et al., 2006).

Exposure to another culture through a study abroad experience has long been considered an ideal opportunity to develop intercultural competence (Engle & Engle, 2004; Norris & Steinberg, 2008; Pederson, 2009; Pitts, 2009). While study abroad terms of a semester to a year have been traditional, short-term programs are becoming increasingly popular (Chieffo & Griffins, 2003) but overall participation in abroad programming continues to be low as a percentage of total enrolled college students (Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2009). Salisbury et al. (2009) note previous studies have investigated potential barriers to participation such as financial constraints, lack of awareness, academic program rigidity, and family obligations. However, recent studies have indicated that students' academic majors may not be a significant indicator of their participation in study abroad (Goldstein and Kim, 2006)

and that the relationship between financial resources and choice to study abroad may be more nuanced (Salisbury et al., 2009).

Cross-cultural encounters can be fraught with the unknown, and this uncertainty may deter individuals from participating in study abroad. In their 2006 study on study abroad participation, Goldstein and Kim examined expectations, levels of ethnocentrism and prejudice, tolerance for ambiguity, intercultural communication apprehension, language aptitude and previous travel experience. They found that the primary indicators that affected a student's choice to study abroad were expectations and intercultural variables. In a longitudinal study, Salisbury et al. (2009) used a college choice theory model to examine students' participation in study abroad and also found that attitudinal factors were most predictive of election into study abroad opportunities. Psychosocial theorists advocate that it is insufficient to simply allow that students differ in the attitude for and predisposition to benefit from learning abroad experiences. More must be understood. We must strive to understand what differences and how such differences interact with a particular student profile in order to design learning interventions that produce the changes that are the goals of higher learning institutions and the needs of business organizations (Shealy, 2006).

To further this stream of inquiry, this pilot study will examine freshman participation rates in a short-term travel program that was designed to eliminate many of the traditional barriers to participation. The short duration of approximately ten days is intended to allow participants to juggle competing work and domestic obligations while the timing of the trips during the university's spring break eliminates conflict with academic responsibilities. The institution finances the cost of the trip, removing financial concerns as a barrier. Even with the removal of these barriers, each year the application pool remains relatively small as a proportion of the entire student body. While the program is meant to give students with little to no previous intercultural or travel experience an opportunity to have an initial abroad encounter, anecdotal evidence indicates that many who apply already have an interest in intercultural issues. This non-experimental, quantitative, comparative study will investigate if differences exist as measured by a standard instrument between those who choose to apply and those who choose not to apply.

Methods

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to identify if and what factors may influence first-year students' election into application for a study abroad program wherein structural barriers to participation have been eliminated.

Research Question. Does a significant difference exist on cognitive, intrapersonal or interpersonal factors as measured by the Global Perspectives Inventory between first-year students electing and not electing to apply for a global learning program that eliminates structural barriers to participation?

Research Hypothesis. First-year students electing into application to participate in a short-term, funded abroad opportunity will show higher development in cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal factors as measured by the Global Perspectives Inventory than students who elect not to apply for the short-term, funded abroad opportunity.

Null Hypothesis. There is no difference in cognitive, intrapersonal or interpersonal factors as measured by the Global Perspective Inventory between students who chose to apply and students who chose not to apply for a short-term, funded abroad opportunity.

Program Description

The Global Citizenship Project (GCP) is a short-term travel program at a small, private university made up each year of small groups composed of students, faculty and staff to different countries. The intent of the GCP is to expose participants to diverse worldviews and cultures and to interest them in further intercultural and travel experiences. The program was designed with an eye to removing barriers to participation. To achieve this, the program was designed to be group oriented to remove the isolation inhibitor, faculty led to remove the fear of foreign navigation inhibitor, and cost free to eliminate the financial barrier. The program content, while still academic in nature, is a more generalized experience rather than tourist experience, focusing on culture-general concepts, people-to-people interactive opportunities, and culture-specific experiences. The program requires of participants a commitment to both pre- and post-travel learning and debriefing sessions.

Experiential learning frames the program as a catalyst to stimulate interest in other longer-term learning abroad opportunities (Good, 2009). Important in the design is that the programs are guided by principles of a dependent learner style suitable for reactive learners and appropriate for an ethnorelative mindset to global engagement. Learners typically require structure, direction, external reinforcement, encouragement, and esteem with authority. The faculty leaders, serving as directors, experts, and authority holders are selected based on a depth of understanding of the culture by being either natives of the host destination, internationalist or scholars who speak the local language, thus providing a direct cultural bridge and reference with credible delivery.

GCP is a highly visible program that is widely talked about amongst the undergraduate student body. Those interested apply to participate through a streamlined application that seeks to identify motivation as the primary selection criterion. Importantly, applicants apply with the expectation that they may be sent anywhere in the world (i.e., destinations are not disclosed until after selection and choice of destination is not an option) and only have the opportunity to elect out of the program after destinations are revealed. Selection for inclusion in the GCP is competitive and generally seen as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Interested individuals must submit an application along with a one-page essay. The application deadline comes very early in the fall semester and is publicized heavily in the first few weeks of the session.

The goal for all participants in GCP is to whet the appetite through message development that drives interest for more intercultural experiences while also providing the introductory tools for doing so. In this way, the GCP program helps to stimulate interest in other travel abroad programs. Students awaken to the value added of learning abroad by participating in the GCP program. They become empowered through experiential learning that encourages recognition of their own potential in overcoming barriers.

Instrumentation

The Global Perspective Inventory is an instrument that measures development in three domains: cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal. The cognitive domain examines knowledge and knowing, that is, what the individual values as important to know as well as their actual knowledge about other cultures. Identity and affect are the two factors involved in the intrapersonal domain, indicating the level of self-awareness and self-acceptance of one's own values and identity as well as one's willingness to accept differences in others. The interpersonal domain is associated with the level of comfort and readiness to engage in interactions with those who are different and is divided into the subscales of social responsibility and social interactions. Finally, the instrument also contains measures related to well-being and global citizenship (Braskamp, Braskamp, Merrill & Engberg, 2010). The instrument consists of 8 subscales made up of 57 items measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).

According to the results of reliability studies of the GPI, the coefficient alphas are as follows: .67 for Cognitive Knowing, .76 for Cognitive Knowledge, .69 for Intrapersonal Identity, .65 for Intrapersonal Affect, .74 for Interpersonal Social Responsibility, and .71 for Interpersonal Social Interaction. Factor loadings for each subscale are .557 for Cognitive Knowing, .767 for Cognitive Knowledge, .695 for Intrapersonal Identity, .683 for Intrapersonal Affect, .690 for Interpersonal Social Interaction, and .723 for Interpersonal Social Responsibility (Braskamp et al., 2010).

Study Group

The Global Perspective Inventory was administered to each section of a freshman seminar course at a small, private university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The instrument was administered at the beginning and end of the fall semester, and the total respondents numbered 388 first year students. Of the group, 172 respondents were male (42%), 214 respondents were female (55%), and 2 respondents identified as other (.5%). Applications for the Global Citizenship Project were submitted within three weeks of the administration of the GPI. Of the 388 respondents to the GPI, 41 also submitted an application to the Global Citizenship Project (GCP). Respondents who did not apply to the GCP numbered 347.

Data Analysis

Raw GPI scores from the first administration of the instrument were coded with the differentiating variable of whether each respondent applied or did not apply for the Global Citizenship Project (GCP). These two groups were coded as "Yes" or "No" in the variable category "GCP app". T-tests were performed comparing the means of the Yes and No groups in each of their GPI sub-scale average scores. Means comparison testing between these groups was also performed on the responses to each item on the GPI. A factor analysis using principle component analysis was conducted in order to identify the constructs underlying the responses. Finally, each factor identified was subjected to a t-test comparing the means of the Yes and No groups.

Results

The analysis indicated that differences exist between those who applied to the GCP program and those who did not in the categories of Cognitive Knowing ($t= -3.103$, $p= .003$), Intrapersonal Affect ($t= -3.044$, $p= .002$), Interpersonal Social Responsibility ($t= -2.359$, $p= .019$), Interpersonal Social Interaction ($t= -3.482$, $p= .001$), Well-Being ($t= -2.574$, $p= .010$) and Global Citizenship ($t= -2.480$, $p= .014$). Differences between the two groups were not found at a significant level in the categories of Cognitive Knowledge and Intrapersonal Identity. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of results from GPI subscale independent means tests

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Cognitive Knowing	4.651	.032	-3.103	47.284	.003
Cognitive Knowledge	.049	.826	-.302	386	.763
Intrapersonal Identity	.267	.606	-.275	386	.784
Intrapersonal Affect	.132	.717	-3.044	386	.002
Social Responsibility	.046	.831	-2.359	386	.019
Social Interaction	.172	.679	-3.482	386	.001
Well-Being	.629	.428	-2.574	386	.010
Global Citizenship	.150	.698	-2.480	386	.014

Independent means comparison testing on each instrument item indicated 16 questions in which mean responses differed significantly between respondents who applied to the GCP program and those who did not. In each of these items, the mean scores of the Yes group trended higher than those of the No group, except in the case of reverse coded items, which were lower. These questions and the results associated with each are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of results from GPI item independent means tests

	t-test for Equality of Means				
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.
* When I notice cultural differences, my culture tends to have the better approach	2.132	386	.034	.302	.142
* In different settings what is right and wrong is simple to determine	2.031	386	.043	.374	.184
I often get out of my comfort zone to better understand myself	-2.086	386	.038	-.325	.156
I take into account different perspectives before drawing conclusions about the world around me	-2.218	386	.027	-.272	.123
* I get offended often by people who do not understand my point-of-view	1.998	386	.046	.314	.157
I consider different cultural perspectives when evaluating global problems	-2.598	54.488	.012	-.284	.109

I am sensitive to those who are discriminated against	-2.159	386	.031	-.297	.138
I am accepting of people with different religious and spiritual traditions	-3.460	386	.001	-.408	.118
I intentionally involve people from many cultural backgrounds in my life	-2.455	386	.015	-.361	.147
I enjoy when my friends from other cultures teach me about our cultural differences	-3.832	386	.000	-.467	.122
I am open to people who strive to live lives very different from my own life style	-2.962	386	.003	-.343	.116
I feel that my college/university community honors diversity and internationalism	-3.356	386	.001	-.441	.131
I understand the mission of my college/university	-2.672	386	.008	-.318	.119
I am both challenged and supported at my college/university	-2.280	386	.023	-.261	.114
I have been encouraged to develop my strengths and talents at my college/university	-2.061	386	.040	-.217	.105
I feel I am a part of a close and supportive community of colleagues and friends	-2.551	386	.011	-.329	.129

* Indicates reversed item
Mean differences compare non-applicants to applicants (e.g. Negative differences indicate non-applicants' average responses were lower than applicants)

A factor analysis using principal component analysis extracted 12 components, five of which contained instrument items that loaded at 0.40 or higher. Factor 1 accounted for 17.319% of the variance, factor 2 for 7.043%, factor 3 for 5.802%, factor 4 for 5.005%, factor 5 for 4.045% and factor 6 for 3.409%. T-tests comparing the means between the Yes and No groups on each of the six factors indicated significant differences in Factor 1 (t= -2.818, p= .005), Factor 2 (t= -3.148, p= .002), Factor 3 (t= 2.347, p= .019) and Factor 6 (t= 2.449, p= .015). Factor 6 contained only two instrument items loading at 0.40 and was eliminated from further analysis.

Twenty-five instrument items loaded onto Factor 1. These questions dealt with respondents' self-reported degree of openness to different viewpoints. Examples of the questions include the following: "I take into account different perspectives before drawing conclusions about the world around me"; "I consider different cultural perspectives when evaluating global problems"; "I am accepting of people with different religious and spiritual traditions"; and "I am open to people who strive to live lives very different from my own life style." This factor was labeled "openness to alternative perspectives".

Factor 2 contained six instrument items, all of which relate to identification and integration with the university community. Sample questions that loaded onto this factor are as follows: "I understand the mission of my college/university" and "I feel I am a part of a close and supportive community of colleagues and friends." This factor was labeled "Community (university integration)".

Five instrument items loaded onto Factor 3. These items represent respondents' tendency towards simplistic views of cultural difference. Sample questions include the following: "When I notice cultural differences, my culture tends to have the better approach" and "In different settings what is right and wrong is simple to determine." This factor was labeled "Ethnocentrism".

Conclusions

In this study it was found that differences do exist between first-year students who elect to apply for a short-term, funded abroad opportunity and those who do not elect to apply. The null hypothesis is rejected.

The results of this study imply that students who choose to engage in abroad experiences already exhibit openness to alternative perspectives and a lower degree of ethnocentrism than those who choose to stay home. Other factors such as emotional intelligence, interdependence, engagement, concern for others and cultural understanding as measured by the GPI subscales of Intrapersonal Affect, Interpersonal Social Responsibility, Interpersonal Social Interactions, Well-being and Global Citizenship are also different between students who elect into abroad experiences and those who do not.

Cognitive knowledge and intrapersonal identity did not present as a significant differentiator between applicants and non-applicants. These results are somewhat surprising as common wisdom might suggest that knowledge of the world and of one's self are important predecessors to intercultural competence. By contrast, cognitive knowing or the degree of sophistication in judging what is important to know may be more indicative of a student's likelihood to go abroad. Another unanticipated finding is the role of community identification and integration as a factor in student self-selection.

Discussion

As previous research has indicated (Goldstein & Kim, 2006; Salisbury et al., 2009), psychosocial factors play a role in student self-selection different from external barriers such as academic discipline, financial concerns and time constraints. The finding of this study supports this tenet.

However, this study goes further to elucidate some of the psychosocial factors that matter, as well as those that do not. In doing so, this study helps meet the call by Shealy (2006) to better understand student profiles, as well as their associated barriers to entry for education abroad programs, such that we may improve learning interventions that stimulate interest with new college students, generate self-election enrollment into education abroad provided by higher learning institutions and successfully serve the emergent needs of business organizations for globally ready graduates. Importantly, the re-allocation of education resources toward factors that make a greater impact into self-election for learning abroad is critical for institutions with declining resources in an environment of escalating demand.

Concentrating resources toward a better understanding of the significance of knowledge as it applies to cultural contexts, cognitive knowing, is indicated by the results of this study to be a wiser use of educational resources than expansion of knowledge on global facts (cognitive knowledge), at least as it impacts readiness to learn abroad. While somewhat surprising that knowledge of the world is not a significant factor in global learning readiness, this may actually be consistent with the idea that knowledge of cultural artifacts is a rather superficial understanding of cultural differences, which are better understood with an appreciation and understanding that there exists differences in values and underlying assumptions in differing cultural contexts, without necessarily knowing what those differences may be. More directly, the findings demonstrate that recognition that there are hidden portions of the cultural iceberg, a common metaphor in intercultural pedagogy, is more essential to readiness and the development of intercultural competence than identifying that portion exposed and easily recognized at the top. This is evidenced with the factor analysis results for openness to alternative perspectives.

Also important from the results of this study is the use of educational resources to foster the integration of new students into the institutional environment and culture, as evidenced from the factor analysis results

for community/university integration. While not readily evident as to the reason, these results support the ideas proponed by Kim (2008) and Good (2010) wherein campuses for institutions of higher learning are serving as important learning labs for the cultural complexity that differs from many students' home communities. This is especially true for first-generation college students who are already experiencing culture shock in moving, for most, from culturally homogeneous communities into the culturally complex environs of a university setting. Election into a second intercultural move across national borders may be too much to soon for students still processing their place within the institutional context. As shown from the results of this study, improving community/university integration for students may also improve the likelihood that students will accept the option for trying on a second, in this case international, cultural shift having become successful with the first in the campus context.

Finally, in moving resources to facilitate Factors 1 and 2, developing openness to alternative perspectives and community/university integration, an institution also begins to move the final factor identified in the results of this study to be of significant difference between those electing and not electing into the learning abroad program. Appreciating underlying values and assumption differences as well as experiencing integration into the culturally complex institutional community opens the process for students to accept a more ethnorelative frame of mind, which was Factor 3 of this study. Discerning differences and interacting appropriately with respect, openness and tolerance across multiple contexts is exactly the communication and behavior areas of competence advocated by intercultural researchers (Hammer et al., 2003; Hunter et al., 2006; Deardorff, 2008) and business organizations in general. Concentrating learning programs to stimulate this area should benefit student readiness, global learning engagement and, ultimately, the institution as well as globally engaged organizations. Making programmatic adjustments to the education process for first year students, as indicated by the results of this study, may help improve earlier self-election into education abroad programs and advances the call to action advocated by Lincoln Commission report for college graduates to be interculturally competent (Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program, 2005).

Recommendations

Based on these findings, it is recommended that university administrators and educators focus greater resources in helping students develop perspective taking and integration into the university community in order to increase participation in global learning opportunities. At the institution in which this research was conducted, a full semester first-year student seminar has been initiated with the learning objectives of developing global awareness, multiple perspectives and university community. Future lines of inquiry to this research include examination of sophomore application rates to the Global Citizenship Project after completion of the first-year seminar program as well as examination of qualitative data to better inform on student perceptions of education abroad learning opportunities. Finally, a future line of inquiry will include longitudinal quantitative and qualitative examination of intercultural student development through varying learning abroad program choices.

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