
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Encouraging Participation in Enriching Educational Experiences – Study Abroad Experiences

Institutional Analysis and Student Affairs

Results from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) suggest that UB students are less likely to participate in study abroad experiences than are students at peer institutions. The purpose of our research with *UB Advocates* (trained student volunteers) was to examine students' motivations for participating in these activities, as well as barriers which might prevent participation.

Two focus groups were conducted to collect data from 14 participants. An additional 28 *UB Advocates* who were unable to attend a focus group session participated by completing an on-line survey which contained questions parallel to those asked in the focus groups. The data presented here are based on the responses of the 42 participants.

Most of the participants are female undergraduates, and over half have been involved as UB Advocates for at least one year. Ten of the twelve UB schools/colleges are represented among the participants: Architecture and Planning, Arts and Sciences, Engineering, Education, Management, Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, Nursing, Public Health, and Social Work. (Only Dental Medicine and Law were not represented.) Of the 31 domestic students, 18 identify as white, 3 as African American, 2 as Asian, 2 as Hispanic, and 6 as other or unknown. The international students come from China, Ghana, India, Korea, Nigeria, Rwanda, and Tunisia.

Based on these students' responses to our questions, we can conclude the following:

- When brainstorming descriptors of an “ideal study abroad experience,” students are most likely to describe the quality of the experience as broadening their horizons;
- Cost and location of the experience are emphasized much less than the quality of the experience when students are describing an “ideal” experience;
- When students are asked to discuss real barriers to participation in study abroad experiences, the expense of the experience and incompatibility of study abroad course credits with UB requirements are the primary deterrents to participation;
- Several students recognize that their perceptions of the costs associated with study abroad and the incompatibility of study abroad course credits with UB requirements may be “myths;”
- UB Administrators can encourage participation by increasing affordability and more effectively counting study abroad coursework in UB program requirements, or by dispelling the myths that study abroad experiences are too expensive and that coursework does not count;
- Effective advertising and marketing materials should emphasize the benefits of study abroad experiences that are most important to students (e.g., meeting new people or developing career-related skills).

BRIEF: Encouraging Participation in Enriching Educational Experiences – Study Abroad Experiences

As described in an earlier brief¹, results from the spring 2008 administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) indicate that UB students score lower on the Enriching Educational Experiences benchmark than students at comparable institutions due to lower rates of participation in co-curricular activities, community service and volunteering, practical and field experiences, and study abroad. This brief describes research efforts to examine more closely student perceptions of and participation in study abroad experiences.

Based on results of a paper questionnaire administered earlier in the fall (October)¹, all respondents agree that UB offers opportunities to participate in study abroad programs, but participation levels do not match those opportunities. Just over a third of respondents (36.7%) believe study abroad to be important to educational goals, but only 10.2% of students report participation. We designed focus groups to explore the perceived importance of and motivations for participation in Study Abroad. We also hoped to uncover perceived barriers that may be discouraging participation.

Participants and Procedures

Fourteen *UB Advocates*² participated in two focus group sessions. In addition, 28 *UB Advocates* participated via a web survey, for a total of 42 students providing feedback. Nearly three-quarters of the participants (30) are female, and over half (27) have been involved as *UB Advocates* for at least one year. Most of the participants are undergraduates (35), with 6 freshmen, 5 sophomores, 9 juniors, and 15 seniors. Of the 31 domestic students, 18 identify as white, 3 as African American, 2 as Asian, 2 as Hispanic, and 6 as other or unknown. The international students come from China (2), Ghana (1), India (1), Korea (1), Nigeria (1), Rwanda (1), and Tunisia (1). The schools/colleges represented are Architecture and Planning (2), Arts and Sciences (18), Engineering (6), Education (1), Management (5), Medicine and Biomedical Sciences (3), Nursing (5), Public Health (4), and Social Work (1). On average, undergraduate participants began the semester with a QPA of 3.26, and graduate/professional participants began with a 3.49. Of the domestic participants, only 4 had been involved in a study abroad experience before participating in this research.

When focus group participants arrived at the session, they were asked to brainstorm words and/or phrases which describe the ideal study abroad experience. Discussion began with their responses. Facilitators then asked students about their participation in study abroad during their enrollment at UB. The web survey contained open-ended items parallel to questions addressed in the focus groups.

Results

The Ideal Study Abroad Experience

Shown in Table 1 are the results of the brainstorming exercise to describe an ideal study abroad experience. Students' words and phrases have been organized into themes and sub-themes, and exemplar words and phrases are included to better illustrate the meaning of the theme. The results of the brainstorming activity suggest that actual experiences students have while studying abroad are most important to creating an ideal study abroad experience. Students appear to want an experience that reaches beyond the traditional classroom to include full immersion in the local culture and excursions to important local landmarks. More practical issues, such as cost, location, and course credit, are much less important than the experience itself when students are thinking about an "ideal" experience.

Table 1: Descriptions of Ideal Study Abroad Experiences

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Sub-Theme</i>	<i>Exemplar</i>
Administrative Issues (14)	Administration (4)	Run completely through school
	Housing (1)	Housing provided
	Length & Timing (3)	Adequate trip length
	Transportation (2)	Transportation provided
	Other (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to communicate with home • Guides familiar with area to translate/give directions, advice, help • Safe, insurance • Renowned school
Cost/Financial Issues (9)		Affordable
Experiences Beyond School (68)	Balance of Experiences (14)	Allows for learning & fun
	Cultural Experiences (35)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broadens horizons • Cultural immersion • Opportunity to know the world
	Interpersonal Connections (11)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making life-long friends • Interactions with native people
	Sight-Seeing/Excursions (8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A few planned trips to famous sites • Travel beyond university
Fits into Academic Program at UB (7)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compatible with major, course of study • Easily transferred credits/apply to major
Language/Cultural Issues (6)	Language Issues (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classes offered in English • No language barrier
	Cultural Issues (1)	Learning customs prior to going
Location (2)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good weather • Nice location (weather/area)
Offers a Variety of Experiences (5)	Volunteer/Community Service (2)	Volunteering opportunities
	Field Experiences (2)	Field Placement
	Job Experiences	Job opportunities

Note: The frequencies (noted in parenthesis) are based on the number of times a theme or sub-theme was mentioned in the brainstorming activity and not on the number of students who mentioned each theme.

Barriers to Participation in Study Abroad

In contrast to the descriptions of an ideal experience where cost was much less important than the quality of the experience, the expense of the study abroad experience becomes very important when students explain why their peers do not participate in study abroad. Exactly half of the participants (21) indicate that expense is a major reason why they choose not to participate. The second most important barrier is the incompatibility of the experience with the requirements of the major (9). Other barriers include the fear of coping in a different culture or in a country where there is a language barrier (7), the fact that the deadline for signing up for study abroad comes too early (2), and the fear of a bad experience (1). Some students do recognize, however, that their beliefs about study abroad (e.g., that it is too expensive or that course credits will not fit into the program of study) may actually be myths based on “hearsay” from other students.

Encouraging Participation in Study Abroad

In order to encourage students to participate in study abroad experiences, the most important action that UB administrators can take from the student perspective is to make these experiences more affordable (14). Another important action administrators can take is to help ensure that courses taken abroad are compatible with requirements for majors at UB (10). Ten students suggest that study abroad experiences need to be advertised better, and that advertising should emphasize the benefits of participation. Other steps that administrators can take include helping students fit study abroad into their programs of study as soon as students enter UB (1), dispelling the myths of study abroad (e.g., expense, credits do not count, 1), and ensuring the safety of students while they are abroad (1).

Conclusions

The participants in this study see the value of a study abroad experience in helping broaden their cultural perspectives and understanding. However, these students perceive that study abroad experiences are too costly and that the courses will not fit into the requirements of the major, thus causing them to need more semesters to complete their degrees. Administrators can encourage participation by helping make study abroad more affordable and by accepting the credits from courses completed abroad into program requirements, or by dispelling the myths that study abroad is not affordable and slows down progress toward the degree.

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¹ The brief is titled, *Encouraging Participation in Enriching Educational Activities: Co-Curricular Activities and Community Service* and is available at:

<http://apb.buffalo.edu/reports/briefs/studentexperiences/EnrichingEducationalActivitiesI.pdf>

² UB Advocates are student volunteers who meet each semester to discuss campus issues with trained facilitators. Since students self-nominate into the UB Advocates program and those who attend a particular session do so based on the scheduling of the session, as well as their interest in a particular topic, they may not be representative of the entire population of UB students.