Chapter 7

Open Minds:
Study Abroad and Student Global Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Study abroad can be life-changing, but the effect of such experience is hard to measure. This research examines the causal link between study abroad and global perspectives. With data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)’s basic survey and the global perspectives module, this study uses factor analysis to create a comprehensive index and then estimates causal effects by matching students who studied abroad during college to those who did not, based on their propensity to study abroad. Key findings are 1) institution type and student’s major make difference in participation rate; 2) study abroad induces a positive, statistically significant but small impact on student global perspectives; 3) such positive impact is consistent across ethnic groups. Yet, there is no clear indication of the mechanism through which these effects may operate. Future research could employ qualitative research methods to understand the mechanism and complement the findings of this research.

INTRODUCTION

According to the most recent United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) statistics, in 2015 at least 4.6 million students worldwide were enrolled in tertiary education abroad (UNESCO, 2017). This is the largest migration in the recent decades, even though some migrations are temporary. In the United States alone, the Institute of International Education (IIE) (2017) reported that the number of students studying abroad for academic credit increased to an all-time high of 325,339 in the 2015-2016 academic year, more than tripled in the past two decades. This means that about 1 in 10 students has overseas learning experience at college. In some colleges and universities, spending a semester or an academic year overseas has already become a mainstream aspect of college life.

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Study abroad has become a significant part of the whole education system, one that cannot be ignored by educational researchers and policymakers. The Paul Simon Foundation Study Abroad Act (Simon, 2007) and the Lincoln Commission Report (Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program, 2005) have called for a vast expansion of study abroad opportunities and participation for a million U.S. students annually. The problem is that this is not enough. First, U.S. students fall short in the entire study abroad population worldwide. Among the 3.5 million students who participate in tertiary education abroad, less than 2% are from the U.S. However, U.S. tertiary enrollment accounts for 10.7% of such enrollment worldwide. Second, minority students are underrepresented. Over time, non-White students have comprised a tiny proportion of the outbound flow of tertiary-level students. This means that study abroad is no longer the luxury it once was, although it is still beyond the reach of many minority students.

The above two phenomena raise a key question: Why should students study abroad? Educators believe that when students go abroad, encounters in foreign settings give them a sense of the complex diversity across cultures. As a result, students gain awareness of cultural differences as well as an ability to see common patterns. This hypothesis also has theoretical support. Given that study abroad offers students a unique life experience different from that at home, John Dewey’s seminal theory of experiential learning helps to explain why we would expect students who participate in study abroad programs to have different learning outcomes (both cognitive and non-cognitive), compared to their counterparts at home. Students gain independence through real-world settings. This new experience exposes students to new problems and experiences that force them to apply their knowledge to real-world applications. In college years in particular, Perry and White’s (1970) intercultural development theory suggests that the evolution in students’ interpretation of their lives is seen and understood through changes in the “forms” in which they conceptualize the issues they face. Therefore, study abroad experience will shape students’ perspectives toward the world and influence their personal growth.

Therefore, this study endeavored to examine the impact of study abroad in college on students’ global perspectives by exploring the following research questions:

1. Who studies abroad? What are the student and institutional characteristics?
2. Does the study abroad experience affect non-cognitive student learning outcomes such as global perspectives? If so, is the effect statistically significant?
3. Does this impact vary by ethnic group? In other words, is the impact different for minority students as opposed to White students?

The remainder of this chapter is organized as follows: Section 3 reviews existing literature with respect to the impacts of study abroad on student global perspectives; Section 4 describes the data; Section 5 presents empirical results based on factor analysis (FA), ordinary least squares (OLS) regression, propensity score matching (PSM), and the instrumental variables (IV) approach; and Section 6 concludes the chapter with a summary of the findings, limitations, and further analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A growing body of study abroad literature focusing on the global perspective considers non-cognitive skills. Many of these studies have examined the changes in students’ tolerance to diversity, intercultural