

THE BOOMERANG EFFECT: WHAT HAPPENS TO INTERCULTURAL PROFICIENCY WHEN STUDY ABROAD STUDENTS RETURN HOME?

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In the past decade, the number of students studying abroad has more than doubled, where today, about 289,000 U.S. college students participate (Institute of International Education 2014) in a study abroad program (SAP); immersing themselves in foreign language, culture and business practices. The extant literature indicates that students returning from SAPs are “transformed” with a new worldview, improved intercultural competence, and a different consciousness of diversity (Albers-Miller 1999; Clarke et al. 2009; Duke 2000). The SAP literature related to marketing students is broad with most of the research focusing on the logistical aspects of the SAP or reporting student satisfaction with the experience immediately upon returning home (Wright and Clarke 2010). Yet, very little empirical evidence exists on the specific areas of personal development and even less research has been conducted on the permanence of these changes.

Most SAP studies measure the impact on learning outcomes only at the conclusion of the program (Vande Berg et al. 2009). Yet, when Rexeisen (2013) surveyed students four months after returning from an SAP, he found substantial regression in cultural development after returning home. When learning outcomes were considered months after an SAP, overall long-term intercultural improvement was insignificant (Pederson 2010; Rexeisen 2008). Rexeisen (2013) calls for further research across broader intercultural proficiencies to “either corroborate or disconfirm” (p.178) the findings. While pre- and post-test studies, immediately upon return, are available (Anderson et al. 1999; Wright and Clarke 2010; Vande Berg et al. 2009), research tracking SAP affects over a longer time period remain uncommon (Rexeisen 2013). Therefore, this study investigates the potential intercultural proficiencies expected to develop from an SAP over an extended period of time. The multi-dimensional characteristics of intercultural proficiency lead to five primary research questions:

1. *Are students more global-minded at the end of an SAP than at the beginning?*
2. *Are students more open to diversity at the end of an SAP than at the beginning?*
3. *Are students more interculturally sensitive at the end of an SAP than at the beginning?*
4. *Are students better able to communicate across cultures at the end of an SAP than at the beginning?*
5. *Do these results vary after spending 16 months back in their home country?*

This research represents one of the few longitudinal studies of SAP affects, comparing survey results from pre-, immediate post-, and after 16 months. The study used Hett’s (1993) Global-Mindedness Scale, Pascarella et al.’s Open to Diversity Scale, and Olson and Kroeger’s Intercultural Sensitivity Index. Hett’s scale (1993) is composed of five elements: responsibility, cultural pluralism, efficacy, global centrism, and interconnectiveness. Olsen and Kruger’s Index is specifically designed to measure the various stages of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett 1993) and the intercultural communication skills shaped in a study abroad program. The sample consisted of 30 marketing students attending the business school of a midsize U.S. state university. All of the students participated in the same semester long study abroad program in Europe. Upon return, the students resumed on-campus classwork without any additional SAP curriculum.

Findings reveal that many of the intercultural proficiency gains measured upon immediate return revert closer to pre-SAP levels after 16 months. Upon return, students demonstrated statistically significant increases in their levels of Global Mindedness and in the Adaptation and Integration levels of the Intercultural Sensitivity Index. After 16 months, intercultural sensitivity scores remain higher than the pre-SAP levels, but, have decreased dramatically and are no longer statistically significant. However, subscales within Hett's Global Mindedness scale remain higher after 16 months.

To further understand these boomerang effects, qualitative responses were also analyzed from immediate post-SAP and after 16 months. The qualitative feedback indicates after 16 months students still feel that the SAP was beneficial, express overwhelming support for the study abroad experience, yet, have difficulty articulating specific areas of personal development. There was a greater focus on the personal relationships established during the SAP, desire to travel more, and the memorable activities specific to their SAP encounter. Such results suggest that the students' perception of the SAP experience have evolved over time.

The findings confirm Vande Berg's (2007) contention that simply sending students to other countries may not be sufficient to result in meaningful lifelong changes. Educators must develop programs to repatriate returning students to secure the intercultural proficiency gains from SAP experiences. Implications arise for how marketing educators can most effectively secure the intercultural proficiency gains from study abroad programs. Questions also abound on how to best assess study abroad programs and how to conduct future research. As marketing educators seek to expand the global horizons of our students, we must work to develop better anchoring and reflection tools so that students maintain the intercultural proficiency growth obtained from cross-cultural experiences. Marketing specific post-SAP cultural anchoring programs are discussed.

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