

Creative Accounting with Study Abroad Numbers

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Abstract

Many universities report "study abroad" numbers in the 25 to 30 percent range and even as high as 70 and 80 percent. When the number of students studying abroad for credit, 270,604 as reported by the IIE 2009-2010 *Open Doors* report, was divided by the approximately 20 million students in U.S. universities, the result was 1.4%. This paper addresses the discrepancy between national averages and institutional claims. It concludes that institutions use widely varying definitions of study abroad and recommends consistent use of seven criteria, including receiving academic credit and a minimum stay abroad, which will permit accurate comparisons.

Key words: study abroad; data reporting; statistical misrepresentation; best practices

The number of students studying abroad seems to be going upwards, flattening only briefly when there is an international health crisis or economic downturn. Do the numbers tell the true story?

As a university dean, provost and then president, I was often skeptical at university system and professional meetings when my colleagues reported "study abroad" numbers in the 25 to 30 percent range and even as high as 70 and 80 percent. My analytical training told me this just couldn't be true. Moreover, my years of trying to get more students to study abroad with limited success meant that either I was pretty much a failure or something else was wrong.

When I quizzed some of the presidents with the high study abroad percentages, they were adamant that they had been provided correct numbers. To be truthful, as a university administrator, I always liked numbers that showed my institution was bigger, better, stronger and faster.

Nonetheless, I did a little back-of-the-envelope calculating to estimate what percentage of students study abroad each year. I divided the 270,604 students the Institute of International Education (IIE) *Open Doors Report* (2011) said studied abroad for credit in 2009-2010 by the approximately 20 million students in U.S. universities, giving me 1.4%.

Then, just like our students, I Googled "How many students study abroad?" and on the first page of the results, I found numerous sources with estimates that ranged from about 1% of all students up to 1.36% of all students.

What explains this discrepancy?

What could explain this discrepancy between national averages and institutional claims? One explanation is the Lake Woebegone effect, where all of the presidents who were bragging about their study-abroad numbers headed institutions that were above average.

Not being satisfied with the Lake Woebegone explanation, I did some initial non-scientific searching into how institutions define study abroad. I found that some institutions count non-credit courses, vacation trips with mom and dad, church mission trips and the like. Perhaps the presidents were not always aware of what they were bragging about. In fact, when I asked them if they used the IIE definition of study abroad, it was the rare president who knew to what I was referring.

I'm not saying that these institutions purposely falsify their study-abroad numbers like Baylor, Claremont McKenna, Clemson, Emory, Iona, Rowan and other universities did with their SAT and/or ACT scores, but all institutions have an obligation to be clear about what activities they report as study abroad.

Example of a publicly-reported discrepancy

“Example University” states in the center of the front page of its website that 71% of its students study abroad. This would mean that 3,700 of its 5,200 undergraduates study abroad. However, the IIE report says 1,100 students, still a respectable 21%, but nowhere near 71%. So, what accounts for the other 50 percentage points of students who “study abroad” but who are not counted in the IIE data? One argument may be that Example is simply basing the percentage on all of the students who study abroad over four years, but this cannot be the case, as an annual study abroad percentage equates to a percentage computed over four years. Consider the following:

A university has 10,000 students and 2,000 study abroad per year. This means that 20% study abroad per year. Over four years (assuming for simplicity that students graduate in four years and enrollment is flat) 40,000 students would have been in attendance. If each year 2,000 students study abroad, 8,000 students would have studied abroad over the four years, and 8,000 divided by 40,000 also equals 20%. Therefore, the percentage determined by dividing the number of students who study abroad in one year by all students on campus that year is the same as all students who study abroad over four years divided by all students who attended over those four years. Based upon what I will discuss below, I suspect that the “Example University” website data includes non-credit and non-institutional international experiences.

Definition of a study abroad experience by IIE

The Institute of International Education (IIE) data seem to be the gold standard in terms of what ought to be considered as study abroad. IIE counts:

“...only those students who received academic credit from an accredited U.S. institution of higher education after they returned from their study abroad experience. Students who travel and take courses abroad without receiving academic credit are not reported in *Open*

Doors, nor are students who are enrolled overseas for degrees from non-U.S. institutions” (<http://www.iie.org/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors/FAQ>).

For an institution, this means that they should be counting:

- Institution students participating in Institution-organized for-credit academic courses abroad
- Institution students participating in other Institutions’ organized for-credit academic courses abroad

The Forum on Education Abroad similarly defines Education Abroad as “a credit bearing education abroad experience” (2011, p.9). Their Code of Ethics does not address how data should be reported but does refer to “...marketing, advertising and promotional materials that avoid unfair and misleading statements” (2008, p.3). The key is: To be counted, students must receive academic credit from an accredited U.S. institution of higher education after they return from their study abroad program. As you will see below, most of the discrepancies I noticed had to do with variations in what different universities count as study abroad.

Varying definitions of study abroad by colleges and universities

What I found in material provided by a number of institutions is summarized below. Most institutions seem to report data correctly; some have even stricter definitions than IIE.

A public university in the east will only count Institutional direct credit programs or transfer credit from accredited degree-granting colleges and universities or programs approved in advance. Students also must have a cumulative 2.5 GPA at the time they apply to study abroad and must have completed no fewer than thirty credits at the home institution.

An urban research university in the south counts: “... any credit-bearing experience that takes place in a foreign country. There must be academic credit attached to the program, in some way, either [institutional] credit or transfer credit.”

The institution goes on to say “We would not count international work, internship or volunteer experiences, unless the students doing these experiences were to receive academic credit for the experience at [our institution] ... [T]here are several groups of [our] student[s] ... who do spring break mission trips that take place in foreign countries. These programs are not credit-bearing and we would not count these students.”

A Great Lakes institution holds to the IIE definition but also stipulates a number of other criteria, including:

- a minimum number of contact hours per week related to the number of weeks the course is in session,
- all, or the major portion of the contact hours to be conducted at an overseas location, and
- a number of hours of course-related work outside of class for each hour in class.

An eastern seaboard university system defines study abroad as “any international study outside of the United States”, but then it goes on to say that these must be “credit-bearing international experiences”. It even specifies how programs work in partnership with host institutions, how reciprocal exchanges work, and how faculty-led courses work. For certain of its colleges, the study abroad program should have specific components such as be academically challenging, and the student must:

- select the honors option if it is available,
- take a language course,
- participate in cultural emersion, and
- stay with a family or in an international dorm.

I also found that some institutions report a wide variety of study abroad experiences but separate out the categories. For example, a regional university in the south counts study abroad experiences beyond the IIE categories, but reports them separately as:

- Institutional students participating in Institutional organized not-for-credit programs (This category includes leadership programs, conference presentations and competitions).
- Non-institutional students participating in Institutional organized for-credit programs.

So, it appears that the IIE gold standard is being held to by at least these institutions, even though some throw a wider net around study abroad. Many institutions do count IIE-wise, and report other experiences separately. It is a source of concern, however, that not all institutions separate out the data when the information is reported elsewhere than to IIE.

Possible over-reporting

Less strict criteria for study abroad are used by other institutions, as illustrated by the following examples. A flagship institution in the Midwest has an approved statement which reads: “Study abroad is defined as any of a number of arrangements by which [our] students complete part of their degree program through educational activities outside the United States. Such activities include – but are not limited to – classroom study, research, intern- or externships, and service learning.”

A northern state university system defines study abroad as: “...all educational programs that take place outside the geographical boundaries of the United States. This includes both credit and noncredit programs.”

Even one of the very sound study abroad examples cited earlier reports, as they say, a “grey area” where experiences outside the U.S. mainland are counted as study abroad; experiences in Hawaii and the U.S. Virgin Islands were included in their study abroad numbers. Consider this other possible study abroad “grey area”: U.S. mainland English-speaking students who study Spanish in Puerto Rico and live with a Spanish-speaking family. The institution that provided this example, however, did not classify this as study abroad.

A northeastern university requires a domestic or international study-away program for all students, and counts a two-credit biology course focusing on the impact of Hurricane Katrina. “These trips to New Orleans, when taken with the academic course, satisfy the university’s study-away requirement.” A domestic study-away experience is fine, but it is not equivalent to study abroad and should be reported separately, as this institution did.

Since I was not able to correlate these definitions with the IIE data submitted and the pronouncements of presidents at these institutions, I cannot say that these institutions do not report properly, but the wide range of criteria creates the possibility for institutions to cite study abroad numbers that are an exaggeration. Certainly there is a discrepancy between the most common conceptions of a student studying abroad, the data reported to IIE and the reality of what institutions are actually counting.

Incentives for over-reporting

Why would institutions over-report? In order to keep good relationships, I did not ask my colleagues that question, assuming that they even know they are over-reporting. However, let me hazard several guesses why there is over reporting.

- We live in a culture that thrives on hype.
- Larger study abroad numbers help recruit students and parents who believe an international experience is a good thing.
- Larger international numbers give the institution bragging rights with the local Chamber of Commerce as it attracts businesses.
- Larger numbers make the institution look bigger, better, stronger and faster.

Concerns with over-reporting

Why should we be concerned with over-reporting?

- It is not academically honest.
- It gives students and parents a wrong idea about what study abroad really is.
- It diminishes the purpose and value of academic study abroad.
- It may even reduce the amount of money going to study abroad, if the numbers of study-abroad students seem adequate to funders.

The future: Virtual on-line study abroad!

In my truncated search into what counts as study abroad, I found reference to several types of so-called study abroad programs that make me fearful.

One style of study abroad is the taking of on-line courses from an institution in another country. An argument for including this is made by a person who recognizes the traditional definition of study abroad, but laments that it may be too costly for some students and parents. She says: “... you can now study at any university located out of country easily through online universities. Many prestige (sic) universities are now offer[ing] their degree programs online that enable students from any country of the world to enroll into their degree programs. You can

study abroad by just crossing the internet border through your modem and study your favorite courses offer[ed] by any country worldwide without the need to go out from your home” (Havert, 2003).

It doesn't take much to imagine other arguments for ingenious ways to accomplish study abroad. I'm sure there are even more creative ideas out there! Consider these possibilities as a starting point:

- Texting or Skyping with students at a foreign university.
- Playing a computer-based simulation of a study abroad experience.
- Becoming an International Avatar in Second Life.

Moreover, there are increasing arguments that study abroad may not be the quickest route to cross-cultural understanding when price is considered. One researcher states: “Given how much study abroad costs, are there other experiences that don't cost as much money for students and institutions that have just as great educational effects?” (M. Salisbury cited in Fischer, 2011). While these writers do not suggest eliminating study abroad, they do argue that we need to think about what we want our students to gain from it and at what price.

What ought to count as a study abroad experience?

I fully support students taking trips abroad with their parents, and I think on-line (not-for-credit) experiences are fine. However, there are several essential components of a true study-abroad experience. To be recorded and reported as an institutional study-abroad experience, it should include:

- academic course credit
- a specified number of hours of instruction
- pre-departure preparation
- physical presence in another country
- a minimum time in the other country
- integration with, or at least interaction with, the local community
- reflection and documentation by students of their experience

Also, I personally believe that the study-abroad experience should include the student being in a country with a first language that is not the student's first language.

One of the anonymous reviewers made the disturbing point that these goals will probably never be met, as study abroad is a market-driven enterprise where often ill-prepared students are sent abroad who generally have little or no interest in analyzing their experiences after they return.

What should we do as Phi Beta Delta members?

- We should encourage all types of study-abroad experiences, but make sure our own institutions categorize and report the data clearly and consistently, distinguishing between (1) IIE-type study abroad and (2) experiences other than academic for-credit study-abroad.

- Determine the veracity of the study abroad data we put on our university websites by comparing that data to data reported to the federal government, to data reported to university systems and state agencies and to other data we know to be true.
- Document why study-abroad experiences are valuable and worth the cost.
- Be clear with our presidents and provosts when we give them bragging points.
- Be forthright with parents about what qualifies as academic study abroad.
- Encourage family trips, but do not count them among our successes.
- Be honest when we present papers and speeches about our study-abroad success.

A final comment

I hope someone will undertake a fuller study of the topic, collecting data in a standardized way. If such a larger study reveals misrepresentation of data, then Phi Beta Delta should consider taking a position on what ought to be counted as study abroad.

About the Author

Carl V. Patton, President Emeritus and Professor of Public Management and Policy at Georgia State University, has taught and conducted research across the U.S. and in Greece, Indonesia and China. During the 1970s and 1980s he co-developed and ran a for-credit study abroad program in Greece. He holds a Ph.D. in Public Policy from the University of California, Berkeley. With David Sawicki and Jennifer Clark he recently published the third edition of *Basic Methods of Policy Analysis and Planning*. His other book topics include quick answers to quantitative problems, infrastructure deterioration, user-built housing in developing nations, and early retirement options.

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