

# Student Preferences for Faculty-Led Honors Study Abroad Experiences

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A critical component of any education, particularly an honors education, is an interdisciplinary curriculum that enriches the college experience. At South Dakota State University (SDSU), the Fishback Honors College strives to provide a robust and holistic educational experience through innovative honors courses paired with enriching co-curricular programs. One way to meet these goals is an honors study abroad experience included as part of the Fishback Honors College curriculum. The study abroad course is an integral part the honors curriculum, fulfilling the requirement of an interdisciplinary colloquium course and thus making it accessible to students from every field of study.

Study abroad courses have many proven benefits for students, including an increase in attributes such as student's self-efficacy (Petersdotter, Niehoff, & Freund; Cubillos & Ilvento), an expansion of cultural knowledge, and a greater openness to new experiences (Martin, Katz-Buonincontro, & Livert). Professional and career development is also a desired outcome for many study

abroad participants (Chapman). Additionally, according to Forsey, Broomhall, & Davis, many students prioritize fun on their study abroad experience. Assessing the desires of students is important in determining how we can best achieve these student-centered outcomes through study abroad offerings.

Several articles and forums have discussed themes and outcomes that are both desirable and valuable in an honors study abroad experience. For example, Braid and Palma de Schrynemakers find fault with the way study abroad courses are often sewn together in an unsystematic process, admonishing facilitators of these courses not to succumb to the downfalls of traditional study abroad programs. Haynes calls for honors programs to offer diverse study abroad programs with accessible, meaningful, reflective, and well-integrated learning outcomes. Even with this research, a need persists to fill existing knowledge gaps about honors study abroad through tangible research and exploration. Our study engaged honors students at South Dakota State University in determining their desired outcomes, perceived barriers, and overall expectations for an honors study abroad program.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

International experiences have become increasingly popular for college students in the United States. According to the Institute of International Education, the number of U.S. students studying abroad has more than tripled over the last twenty years, increasing to 325,339 students in the 2015–16 academic year. Motivating factors for studying abroad include the individual benefits gained from experiencing a new culture or place. According to Anderson and Lawton, students seek a sense of world enlightenment and personal growth more than career development and entertainment when they study abroad. Heightened empathy and openness are also likely outcomes from study abroad (Martin, Katz, & Livert; Narvaez & Hill). Likewise, Jackson concluded that experiencing new cultures increases a person's social pragmatism and decreases ethnocentrism. Another study found a positive correlation between exposure to differing cultures and an increase in creativity and receptiveness (Leung & Chiu). An understanding of both the perceived and tangible benefits of studying abroad is key to meeting the needs and desires of students.

Understanding the demographics of students who are choosing (or not choosing) to study abroad is also vital in developing a meaningful and productive study abroad program. According to the Institute of International Education, 66% of students who studied abroad from the United States

during the 2015–16 academic year identified as women, and 72% identified as white. Consistently, nearly 60% of students who study abroad do so during their junior or senior year of college (Institute of International Education). While noting these current demographics, we must also look at trends going forward. Between 2006 and 2016, there was a 65% growth in the percentage of minority students abroad, and the number of students majoring in STEM fields increased to 25% (Institute of International Education). Study abroad offerings should meet the needs of the changing student demographic choosing to participate in these experiences.

Students have several motivations when choosing a study abroad location. According to Anderson and Lawton, students who seek entertainment as their primary motivation often choose countries that present them with fewer challenges, such as destinations where people speak the same language. Meanwhile, students who seek world enlightenment often choose a country that presents greater challenges in the form of different languages, customs, or cultures (Anderson & Lawton). According to the Institute of International Education, 54% of American students chose to study in a European country during the 2015–16 academic year, and the top five study abroad destinations for American students were all western European countries. The next most popular regions for study abroad were Latin America and the Caribbean (16%) followed by Asia (11%) (Institute of International Education). Understanding where students want to study abroad can help institutions organize experiences of interest to students that also push them outside of their comfort zones.

Short-term study abroad options, especially those offered during the summer, are popular among college students. According to the Institute of International Education, 35.4% of students who studied abroad during the 2015–16 academic year chose a summer study abroad program that was no longer than eight weeks. Carley and Tudor found that students' views and perceptions about a country changed after just two weeks abroad, concluding that these short-term exposures are a valuable option for students. Sachau, Brasher, & Fee suggested the term "study tour" to refer to faculty-led study abroad programs that are one to four weeks in length and involve travel between cities and sites in one or more countries. Although some criticize these shorter, tour-focused experiences as less valuable, they can still equip students for future independent travel and engagement in a global world.

Study tours often focus less on content knowledge and more on shaping students' attitudes about a country or culture and helping students develop confidence traveling internationally (Sachau, Brasher, & Fee). Many study

abroad courses focus on a subject or theme that is relevant to the destination country or to the faculty leaders' areas of expertise. In honors, we have the unique opportunity to approach study abroad from an interdisciplinary perspective. Students who are participating in a study tour are often required to register for academic credit to accompany the experience, adding incentive for students to participate fully in the experience and enabling them to apply for financial aid to help offset costs (Sachau, Brasher, & Fee). Some study tours include pre-departure meetings or classes that allow students to meet and interact with one another and with the faculty leaders and that are an important tool for reducing student and faculty anxiety prior to traveling with the group (Koernig). Otero also stresses the value of the faculty-led model for honors study abroad experiences because faculty are able to connect the study abroad course and curriculum directly to the values and objectives of the honors program.

Pre-departure classes offer an opportunity to discuss academic content and background information with the traveling group. Such classes allow students an opportunity to learn about the destination country and culture, which Braid and Palma de Schrynemakers stress as an important part of creating a meaningful experience abroad. Focusing on the academic content in this setting also allows more time for cultural activities while abroad (Koernig), which is especially important in a short study tour. The format of the pre-departure course and assignments can vary to meet the needs of the instructors and students. According to Duke, exposing students to experiential and collaborative learning that requires them to work in groups and to take some control of the learning process helps them learn more efficiently and rapidly. Another approach is assigning journal prompts that ask students to reflect on what they are learning and experiencing both before and during their time abroad (Duke; Sachau, Brasher, & Fee). Donahue stresses that the honors study abroad experience should incorporate self-reflection on culture before, during, and after immersion in the destination country. The assignments given before and during a study abroad experience should incorporate this reflection in the way that best meets the needs of the class and the students.

## **THE FISHBACK HONORS COLLEGE MODEL FOR STUDY ABROAD**

At SDSU, honors-led study abroad experiences comprise intentional discussion, reflection, and a guided exploration of themes of diversity and

awareness. The experience abroad may include studying philosophy and the ethos of honors in Greece or studying human morals and global ecosystems in the Galapagos Islands. Study abroad provides a platform for students to learn significant information in an engaging way, and an honors-led experience has the potential to facilitate and accelerate this learning.

The Fishback Honors College has a brief, but rich history in offering honors study abroad experiences (Table 1). Each year, nearly 25 student and faculty participate in the honors study abroad course. The destination changes from one year to the next and rotates between popular European options such as Greece or Ireland and less-frequented areas such as the Galapagos Islands and Indonesia. These destinations are based on interest from students and faculty, and we attempt to visit countries where SDSU does not already have an established study abroad program in another discipline. Each year, we work with an outside company to coordinate our in-country experiences, which adds to the cost of the experience but saves time for the faculty leaders and honors staff and helps us to continue offering new experiences in different locations. The approach of offering new destinations and interdisciplinary themes annually allows for collaboration with dynamic faculty from all backgrounds as well as recruitment of honors students from every discipline.

A critical component of the honors study abroad program at SDSU is the seamless integration of this course into our students' schedules and graduation requirements. Student participants enroll and participate in a three-credit honors course during the spring semester where they explore the themes, history, traditions, and culture of the destination country. These credits may fulfill a required upper-division interdisciplinary honors colloquium. Immediately following the completion of the spring semester, students and faculty depart for a ten- to fourteen-day immersion in their destination country.

**TABLE 1. HISTORICAL STUDY ABROAD DATA**

Location	Number of Students/Faculty	Duration	Cost <sup>1</sup>
Greece	20/3	May 11–22, 2015	\$5110/\$5320
Galapagos Islands	18/3	May 9–20, 2016	\$5926/\$6016
Ireland	20/2	May 7–18, 2017	\$4548/\$5058
Indonesia	24/3	May 7–21, 2018	\$4502/\$4702

<sup>1</sup>Cost includes the 3 credits for the class. The first number is the amount billed by SDSU (after \$500 scholarship), and the second number is total cost including estimation for meals (after \$500 scholarship).

The goal of this present study was to determine the effectiveness of our honors study abroad model. Two overarching objectives guided our survey. First, we wanted to determine what students want from an honors study abroad experience, i.e., location, length, timing, and outcomes. Second, we wished to discover if our current model meets the needs of our students.

## METHODS AND RESULTS

To understand student expectations and preferences for honors study abroad experiences, we developed a twelve-question survey with QuestionPro and distributed the survey to sophomores enrolled in the Fishback Honors College. The survey contained a variety of question types, such as Likert-type responses, rankings, and multiple-choice questions. The survey was available to students in the spring of 2017.

Seventy-seven students completed the survey, yielding a 69% response rate. Seventy-seven percent of students indicated that they had some interest ( $n=37$ ) or were very interested ( $n=22$ ) in participating in an honors study abroad experience during their undergraduate career (Table 2), and 46% of students said they would likely do so. Cost was the single most important factor when determining whether a student would participate in a specific study abroad experience (Table 3). In fact, 85% of students reported that total costs of \$4,000 or \$5,000 would be prohibitive to their participation. Cost was followed closely by destination and the timing or duration of the study abroad experience in terms of importance. An overwhelming 61% of students found it most desirable to study abroad immediately following the end of the spring semester. The next highest preferred timeframes included the middle of the summer (13%) and winter break (12%). The faculty leaders ranked lowest as a determining factor for choosing a particular study abroad experience.

**TABLE 2. INTEREST IN PARTICIPATING IN AN HONORS STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE (N = 77)**

Interest Level	Percentage
Very Interested	29
Some Interest	48
Neutral	12
Little Interest	6
Not at all Interested	5

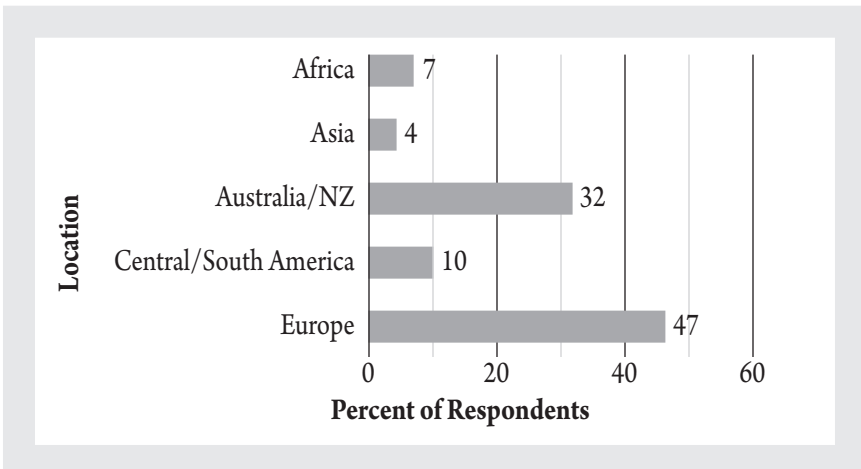
Students had strong opinions on the location, duration, and academic theme of honors study abroad experiences. Europe (n=36) and Australia/New Zealand (n=25) were by far the most popular destinations, yielding 79% of the votes, leaving Central America, Africa, and Asia to a combined 20% of students' greatest interest (Figure 1). Students expressed the greatest interest (69%, n=53) and likelihood of participating (92%, n=71) in study abroad experiences that would take place over a duration of one to three weeks as compared to longer-term experiences (Table 4). The interest (3%, n=2) and likelihood (1%, n=1) of studying abroad for a semester were much lower.

**TABLE 3. RANKING IMPORTANCE OF FACTORS DETERMINING DESIRE TO STUDY ABROAD (N = 77)**

Factor	Ranking Percentages					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Ability to Fit in Schedule	6	17	12	19	26	20
Academic Focus	5	20	17	25	27	6
Cost	68	14	5	3	5	5
Destination	5	27	31	17	15	5
Faculty Leaders	9	3	6	10	16	56
Timing/Duration	6	19	29	26	12	8

Note: Students were asked to rank the above factors in order of importance when determining their ability/desire to participate in a study abroad program.

**FIGURE 1. STUDENTS' PREFERRED CHOICE OF STUDY ABROAD LOCATION (N = 77)**

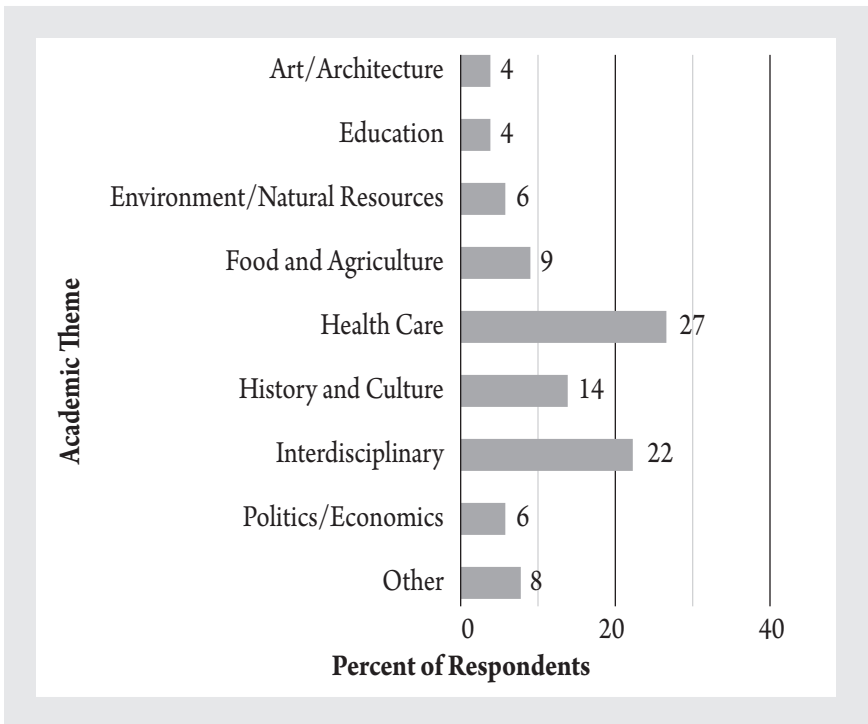


Regardless of destination or timeframe, students preferred academic themes related to health care (n=21) and history and culture (n=11) or interdisciplinary themes (n=17) (Figure 2). The strong preference for themes related to health care makes sense as the top three majors by student enrollment within the Fishback Honors College are biology, pharmacy, and nursing.

**TABLE 4. INTEREST AND LIKELIHOOD OF PARTICIPATING IN STUDY ABROAD BASED ON DURATION (N = 77)**

Duration	Greatest Interest	Greatest Likelihood of Participating
1–3 Weeks	69%	92%
1–2 Weeks	22%	7%
3 Months	5%	0%
1 Semester	3%	1%
1 Academic Year	1%	0%

**FIGURE 2. STUDENT’S INTEREST IN POTENTIAL ACADEMIC THEMES (N = 78)**





Students also indicated their preferred scope of the study abroad program as multidisciplinary learning (45%) and service learning (35%) more than single disciplinary focus (19%).

Students were asked to reflect on the outcomes that they would hope to receive from participating in an honors study abroad experience. Based on their responses, we developed four overarching reasons for studying abroad: cultural development, professional development, personal development, and social engagement (Table 5). We did not establish these categories prior to the administration of the survey, so we do not have an equal number of survey items in each category; however, they offer more comprehensive and overarching terminology for discussing the reasons students choose to study abroad. Cultural development accounted for more than 40% of the overall

**TABLE 5. STUDENTS' DESIRED THEMES AND OUTCOMES OF STUDY ABROAD (N = 229)**

Theme	Percent of Respondents
Cultural Development	41
Experience a new culture	23
To learn what life is like elsewhere	9
Expand my understanding of humanity/ human condition	6
Building relationships globally	2
Better understanding of own country	1
Personal Development	23
Personal development	16
Self-reflection	3
Improve a new language	3
Gain independence	1
Professional Development	22
Career experience	11
Résumé building	7
Support career path	4
Social Engagement	14
Fun/Cool/Exciting	14

Note: Students were asked to select 3 of the above objectives that they would like to receive out of a study abroad experience.

responses and included outcomes such as experiencing a new culture, expanding understanding of humanity, and building global relationships. Personal development and related outcomes accounted for 23% of the responses while outcomes related to professional development included 22% of responses. Social engagement, which included only one item, accounted for 14% of students' desired outcomes from studying abroad.

## DISCUSSION

The survey allowed us to understand our students' study abroad needs and will help us serve them better as we plan future honors study abroad experiences. We hope that the results also prove useful for other honors colleges and programs that are planning study abroad experiences. The Institute of International Education found that around 60% of students who study abroad do so during their junior or senior year of college. Thus, we surveyed sophomore honors students regarding their preferences for faculty-led honors study abroad programs, allowing us to gather feedback from students who were more likely to be aware of the honors study abroad program and who still had time to participate in a study abroad program in the future.

One of the key takeaways from our survey was determining the ideal length and time for an honors study abroad experience. The students who responded to our survey indicated that they are overwhelmingly more likely to study abroad with honors when the international experience is one to three weeks in length and takes place immediately following the conclusion of the spring semester. This result aligns with the timing and duration of past honors study abroad offerings at SDSU, so we plan to continue the practice of traveling abroad for one to three weeks at the beginning of the summer. Some of the research suggests that longer study abroad experiences have more benefits for students, but not every student is willing or able to spend that much time abroad—even during the summer. Many students need to work or find internships during the summer, and studying abroad during the May interim allows plenty of time for this. We also hope that if students undertake a shorter study abroad experience, they will be more likely to take advantage of longer study abroad opportunities in the future.

One interesting inconsistency between our survey results and past participation in our study abroad experiences was the response to the question about cost. Eighty-five percent of students indicated that costs of \$4000 or \$5000 would be prohibitive to their participation in an honors study abroad experience, but all of our honors study abroad offerings to date have cost at

least \$4500 (Table 1). One reason for this inconsistency could be the cost of the three-credit class that accompanies our study abroad experience. The total cost for the study abroad programs presented in Table 1 includes the tuition cost, which is around \$1000. We did not specify in our survey question whether tuition costs were included, so students may have been thinking strictly about travel costs. Taking out the cost of the credits, two of the honors study abroad offerings would be below \$4000 and two would still be above \$4000 after factoring in the automatic \$500 study abroad scholarship that all honors students receive. Another possibility is that the cost of the honors study abroad offerings to date may be truly prohibitive for students since the survey respondents indicated that cost was the most important factor in determining whether they would participate in an honors study abroad experience. We will need to take this matter into account when planning future study abroad experiences. We partner with an outside organization that plans the itinerary and takes care of all our in-country arrangements and expenses, which has made it easier to plan new experiences in new countries with new faculty leaders each year but which adds to the cost of the experience for students. A challenge for us—and for anyone organizing a study abroad experience—is balancing cost with convenience.

Not surprisingly, our students indicated they were most interested in studying abroad in Europe, aligning with the findings of the Institute of International Education about where students are most likely to study abroad. However, while only 4% of our students who responded to the survey indicated Asia as their area of greatest interest, we reached our maximum capacity for an honors study abroad course for the first time this year with our upcoming experience in Indonesia. One explanation for this inconsistency is that more students are aware of the opportunity to study abroad now that we are in our fourth year of offering it, so we have a larger pool of students who are considering and taking advantage of studying abroad with honors, no matter the destination. Another consideration is that we have only one honors study abroad option each year. Students could be choosing their study abroad experience based more on timing and less on location because they know they want to go abroad with honors. Finally, we have several students who have participated in more than one honors study abroad experience. For example, four of the students participating in the upcoming Indonesia course have previously studied abroad with honors.

Faculty leaders ranked as the least important factor for students deciding whether to study abroad with honors. Because honors students already have

a community within the honors student body, they may feel comfortable with the other students and care less about the faculty leaders. Students also know that a representative of the Fishback Honors College administrative team—either the dean or the academic advisor—always serves as a co-leader for the honors study abroad experiences, and since the students typically know this person already, they feel less uncertainty about other faculty leaders.

The students who responded to our survey indicated that experiencing a new culture was the number one reason they would participate in a study abroad experience. The second most common reason for studying abroad was personal development, followed by fun/excitement and career experience. These results align with research from Anderson and Lawton, which found that students desired world enlightenment and personal growth over career development and entertainment when they participate in study abroad experiences. This finding also strengthens the case for offering interdisciplinary honors study abroad experiences since most students are not looking to study abroad for specific major- or career-related reasons.

Students felt strongly about the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary nature of the honors study abroad experience, which aligns with our current model. Honors promotes interdisciplinary inquiry, and a study abroad experience supports this goal. Offering a three-credit course prior to the international experience allows us to spend time talking about different facets of the destination country and culture, and we maintain flexibility in our curriculum to adapt discussions to the majors and interests of the students. Honors also promote services, and our students indicated a strong interest in service-oriented study abroad experiences, an unsurprising result since many of our students participate in mission trips and university-sponsored service learning experiences. We hope to fulfill this interest by offering service-focused honors study abroad opportunities in the future.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

While the target audience and data collected for our study were limited to a very specific student population, the results align with other research and national data on student preferences for study abroad opportunities. We encourage other honors programs and colleges to consider conducting their own surveys to determine the unique desires and needs of their students when it comes to study abroad. One future study might ascertain if student respondents have previously studied abroad. Knowing which students had

studied abroad prior to taking the survey could prove relevant to the conclusions gathered from the responses. Additionally, a factor that may have influenced our study is that the surveyed audience most likely comprised students who were more apt to respond to a voluntary survey or those who were interested in studying abroad.

This study left us with several ideas for future research. We are interested in knowing whether students who participate in a short-term, faculty-led study abroad experience—particularly an honors study abroad experience—are more likely to study abroad again in the future. We think it would also be beneficial to devote more time to researching the benefits honors students gain from studying abroad in comparison to non-honors students; this study offers insight only into the needs and desires of honors students, and we discovered that they considered cost, destination, and increased cultural competency as the most important factors when deciding whether to study abroad.

Understanding the data gathered, coupled with previous studies, we can ascertain that the current study abroad program at the Fishback Honors College provides a good model for honors study abroad experiences. Previous research has shown that the ten-to-fourteen-day length for the program has positive outcomes for students, aligning with our students' desired length of time for a study abroad experience. This study also shows a positive correlation between our program's interdisciplinary focus and students' desires for an interdisciplinary study abroad experience in honors.

This study was a first step in improving our study abroad program for students in the Fishback Honors College. The data will inform future practices and efforts to create the best honors study abroad experience possible. We recommend that other honors programs and colleges take time to assess the effectiveness of their own study abroad offerings through comparisons to previous research and surveys of student needs and desires. We believe creating a study abroad program that is appealing for students and meets their needs will encourage more participation in the important and powerful experience of studying abroad.

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