

Student Perceptions of Various Types of Study Abroad Service Providers in the United States

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Abstract

Study abroad programs and the need for multicultural education is becoming more popular in United States higher education institutions. These multicultural programs can include various types of programming such as faculty-led, university international center sponsored, third-party providers, or a combination thereof. Understanding the perceptions of participants can influence the type of programs needed within an institution. This study examined the perceptions of students participating in a study abroad, faculty-led program sponsored by the university with the assistance of a third-party provider. The results suggest students are not fully aware of the complexity of organizing study abroad opportunities and hold faculty most responsible. Additionally, qualitative data analysis demonstrated that students find language issues as the most challenging aspect of their study abroad experience. Conversely, making new relationships and experiencing new cultures was found to be the most rewarding.

Keywords: study abroad, intercultural competence, student perceptions

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With the growing popularity of study abroad programs at United States higher education institutions, more information as to why students seek these experiences, what benefits are gained, and their satisfaction with the outcomes is needed. By the year 2006, over 90% of all colleges and universities offered study abroad within their curriculum (Hoffa & DePaul, 2010). Data released by the Institute of International Education in 2019 reports a recent increase in United States students who studied abroad (Institute of International Education, 2019). This is a trend that has consistently presented itself in a pre-COVID era. Advocacy for study abroad is increasing with support coming from government institutions, private donations, and publicly visible figures.

This study examines the perceptions of students participating in study abroad experiences at the university level. The students providing data for analysis were asked to provide feedback on the three levels of service providers within the study abroad experience; faculty, international office personnel, and third-party providers. Identifying how students perceive those responsible for the experience can lead to the creation of effective, meaningful study abroad experiences. The resulting data from this study also identifies the areas students find most difficult and most rewarding while participating in a study abroad experience and how these areas link to the responsible provider.

Literature Review

Intercultural competence has fostered many different definitions and foci for study. Diller & Moule (2005) defined the term as a, “set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professional and enable that system, agency or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations” (p.12). Trubmall and Pacheco (2005) defined it as, “the ability to recognize differences based on culture, language,

race, ethnicity, and other aspects of individual identity and to respond to those differences positively and constructively”(p.4). Mitu et al. (2021) expand this notion by including, “elements of cognitive, affective, attitudinal nature, that determine(s) a person’s identity, includes behaviors values manifests at an intrapersonal but also interpersonal level”(p. 135). Regardless of the exact definition, the intent is clear; the need for culturally competent individuals is crucial to increasing understanding and acceptance across cultures. And in this current era of increased global relations, the need is even more critical. Many reasons serve in perpetuating the popularity and desire to internationalize students by studying abroad in preparation for a more global environment. Literature lends proof that students become more globally aware when studying abroad (Clarke, et al., 2009). Haas (2018) reports studying abroad has a definite effect on students’ cultural awareness. Doppen and An (2014) support that students who participate in a study abroad experience exhibit personal and professional growth based on their experiences. Baecher and Chung (2020) speak to the increased awareness of study abroad candidates in recognizing the cultural differences of others after a study abroad experience. Raby, et al. (2021) found studying abroad led students to self-disclose their discovery of cultural differences and their heightened sensitivity to how one’s own cultural can impact how they view others. Some employers prefer hiring candidates with strong global competencies like those found from studying abroad (Tarrant, 2010). Clark, et al. (2009) echo these thoughts by suggesting students who participate in a study abroad experience possess enhanced ability to work well with individuals in cross-cultural settings.

Study abroad opportunities have proven to enhance intercultural competence and in turn contribute to competent global citizenship (Bennett, 2009). According to Wickline et al. (2020), the world has, “become increasingly interconnected, the concept of intercultural competence

(ICC) becomes even more important and relevant”(p. 128). The authors go on to label ICC as “crucial for communities to grow and thrive”(p. 129). Median and Kiefel (2021) note, “a study abroad program fits the definition of internationalizing the curriculum”(p. 63). As the history of study abroad has evolved, so too has the purpose and meaning in creating culturally competent citizens.

In this increasing era of study abroad as part of a student’s education at higher learning institutions, various providers become part of the process. Stebleton et al. (2013) proposed that a student’s intercultural competence development can be linked directly to their expectations and structure of the study abroad experience. The authors concluded the more structured and well-planned the study abroad experience, the more intercultural growth was developed in students. Although much controversy surrounds the notion of length of a program in regard to the level of learning, authors such as Chiocca (2021) suggest, “the type of intervention might be more significant for intercultural competence and sensitivity development than the length of the program itself”(p. 38). To that end, examining the type of experience and provider used in university programs is needed to predict the degree of intercultural learning in students.

The most common framework used to provide study abroad experiences to students at the university level is a faculty-led program developed by an individual college or university. These programs are often short-term and are, “frequently conducted by university faculty based on their specific areas of expertise” (Meyer, et al., 2019, p. 94). Doyle, et.al (2010) concluded having faculty members lead study abroad contributed to increased participation long term. The developing institution sets the criteria for participation including destination, housing, activities, grades, cost of programming, etc. Although some challenges may arise within the institution and the coordination of the experience (Raby et al., 2021), students most often learn to navigate the

system successfully. A sponsoring institution may seek the assistance of a host institution or individual third-party entity to assist with the logistics of the program, but the overarching control still rests with the individual institution.

In a similar fashion, a consortium of colleges or universities may be created. A consortium approach allows for the pooling of resources and shared administration of study abroad programming. Usually, the consortium sets the parameters for participation in terms of destination, housing, activities, costs, etc. but will often find the academic criteria remains individual to the institution. Grades and/or credits can be decided by the individual institution. This provides the convenience of offering students a pre-determined program negating the need for an individual institution to use their own resources by way of faculty. Most universities find any financial requirement for belonging to these types of consortiums justified by the savings found in providing their own personnel resources (faculty to lead a study abroad program). In a comparable approach, some colleges or universities may allow students to participate in programs offered as individual faculty-led programs by partner universities with a method of transferring credits or paying fees for students to take advantage of programs not offered at their home institution.

An additional method for offering students opportunities to study abroad can be found using third-party providers. These providers may operate as a nongovernmental, not-for-profit organization such as CIEE (Council on International Educational Exchange), which operates over 175 study abroad programs world-wide. There are also numerous for-profit providers such as CEA (Cultural Experiences Abroad). These third-party providers offer students opportunities to study abroad but without the responsibility of the colleges or universities needing to use their own resources to facilitate them. This allows colleges and universities to offer a wider variety of

programs without incurring the costs of development, facilitation, and maintenance of the programs. To that end, third-party providers are generally less cost effective for students. They may also require more flexibility from the university or college when equating course equivalencies or the ability to control the curriculum delivered during the experience. A caution to consider when using a third-party provider is the inability to control the logistics and curriculum of the program. Some programs may perpetuate “negative impacts in both students and host communities”(Vann Nabi & Estes Brewer, 2021, p.18). Considering this issue requires additional vetting and oversight by universities to ensure positive experiences for students. Even with this concern, between the years 2000 and 2007 approximately 25% of students studying abroad did so through a third-party provider (Redden, 2007).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze the three major prongs of service rendered to students during a study abroad experience. Analyzing will look to identify trends of experience and perceptions of student participants. This study is unique in that it explores the trilogy of services provided and compares the perceptions of all three prongs in a single study. The three prongs are comprised of the faculty advisor, the local third-party service provider in Spain, and the International Center. The logistics aspects of the study, including promotion, are handled by the International Center within the university. The data collected will be used to better understand the student’s perceptions of those involved in organizing and delivering a six-week study abroad experience to Northern Spain. Each individual represented by the three prongs has unique responsibilities and relies on each of the members to provide a quality experience. By better understanding the student’s perceptions, continued improvements may be made to the total experience.

Research Design

This study was a mixed method approach, using data of both a qualitative and quantitative nature. Collecting both quantitative and qualitative data increased the validity of the results by allowing for triangulation of the data. Data was collected through a census of participants as all students participating in the study abroad experience were surveyed. The study was approved by the university Human Subjects in Review Board, including all data collection methods. The data was collected through a 25 question survey designed by the researchers with open-ended responses as well. Qualitative data was collected by way of written narratives and open-ended question responses provided by students within the survey. Qualitative remarks were analyzed for themes to determine patterns emerging from student remarks. Included in the survey were statements, which the students were asked to rank from “strongly agree” to strongly disagree.” The answers were then assigned a numeric value, five being “strongly agree” and one being “strongly disagree.” This allowed the data to be analyzed through a quantitative lens to increase the reliability by triangulating data. Questions asking specifically about each area of service will serve as the key variable for that prong. Questions regarding experiences indirectly relating to each prong of service will serve as sub-variables for each area of service.

Participants

The participants in this study were undergraduate students at a mid-west university of approximately 25,000 students. Data was collected for two consecutive years with two different types of study abroad experiences used for data collection. The first study abroad experience consisted of 12 students enrolled for fall semester in the College of Education. The study abroad experience contributed to their pre-service teaching field experience. Students chose to participate in a six-week study/teach abroad experience to Northern Spain and be placed in local

schools for approximately 20 hours per week in addition to participating in cultural activities and exploration embedded within the program. Students participated in all aspects of the classroom on a daily basis. Additional data was collected from 10 students participating in a study abroad experience the following spring. These students were general education students seeking a study abroad experience. Students were enrolled in a cultural exploration course and a general studies course in the foundations of education.

Data Collection and Analysis

The survey was distributed through an electronic link, from which students could either print, complete and physically hand-in, or digitally complete and return to a third-party individual to protect the anonymous nature of the survey. Students were asked to complete the survey within two weeks after the completion of the program. Data was collected over two consecutive years of study abroad experiences. Over the two semesters of study abroad, a total of 16 surveys were completed from the 22 students who participated in the program; 14 participants participated in the first year and 8 in next.

Data was collected with each survey analyzed for repetitive words and phrases to establish themes and patterns within the qualitative remarks. Like words and phrases were grouped to identify the themes noted in the data analysis section. Data was also collected in a quantitative manner to allow for triangulation of findings. This was intended to lend validity of the qualitative data collected.

Surveys with the quantitative data were entered into an Excel file. Due to the small quantity of surveys, the data in the Excel file were manually checked for accuracy. Frequencies of the data values were also produced in SAS, and advanced statistical processing software, to explore any unusual values. Variables were created for each ranked question from the survey.

Each quantitative question from the survey was a qualitative, ordinal variable and was answered as “Strongly Agree”, “Agree”, “Neutral”, “Disagree”, or “Strongly Disagree”. These rankings were translated into numeric values, with five being “Strongly Agree” and one being “Strongly Disagree”. This allowed for the reporting of quantitative descriptive statistics. There were no outliers in the data, likely because there was a set range of possible values for each variable. The key variables for this analysis came from survey questions six, eight, and ten, regarding the faculty director, the local third-party service provider, and The International Center, respectively. The initial analysis included descriptive statistics regarding only these three key variables.

Findings

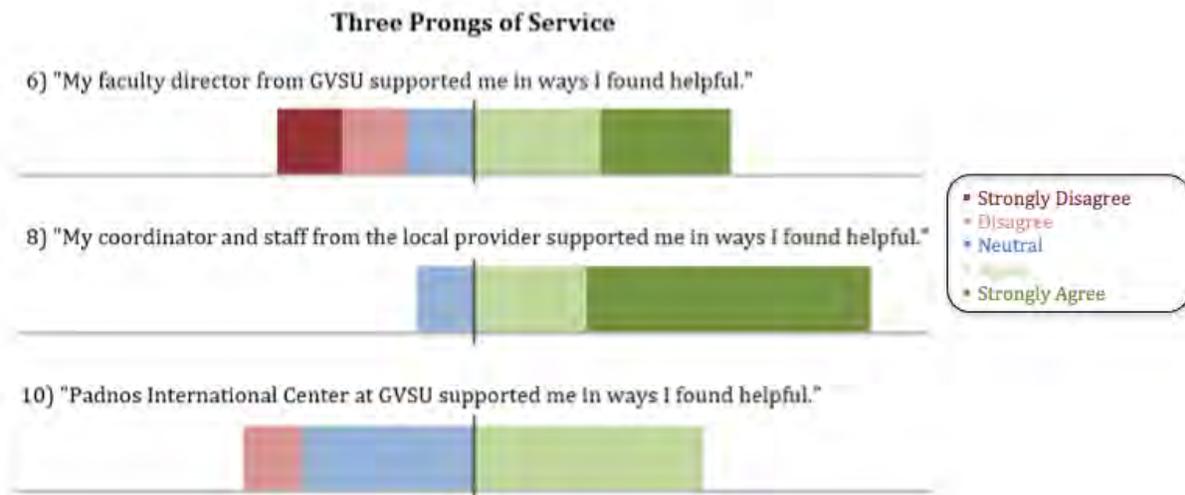
When analyzing the qualitative remarks for common themes, the most noted discussion involved the description of ‘helpful’. The word ‘helpful’ appeared 16 times in various questions and in various contexts. The perceptions of helpful identified a pattern of students expecting help to be equated to problem solving for the student and not with the student. Most positive comments identified under the helpful theme were directed at the local provider, with the most negative comments identified under the helpful theme directed at the faculty advisor. Comments such as, “I expected her to be more helpful and take care of more of my issues” exemplifies the expectations of students wanting a more controlled experience. This was countered with comments such as, “she helped me when I asked, but didn’t involve herself unless I initiated contact.” This leads to the assumption students perceive the concept of help as arranging and managing aspects of the experience without expectations of student using their own problem-solving skills.

A similar theme found in the qualitative remarks was that of support. The pattern of remarks indicated students equate support to the concept of managing rather than assisting.

These remarks were most often associated with the faculty advisor. Much like with the concept of helping, supporting was perceived as arranging all aspects of the student’s experiences, rather than assisting them. This suggests students are not prepared to problem-solve or make decisions when participating in a study abroad. Figure 1 depicts a visual representation of the concepts of helpful and supportive.

Figure 1

Response Distribution for Three Key Variables



The qualitative data also revealed what students perceived as their biggest challenge. The theme of language was noted by 16 of the 22 participants as their biggest challenge. Although English was the language spoken within their assigned classrooms, students commented on the difficulties of interacting with others outside the classroom as most frustrating. “I had a hard time ordering food since menus were all in Spanish” exemplifies a common theme found in the data. Issues relating to experiencing every day needs such as food and shopping were most prevalent. “...I wanted to buy things but was too afraid because I couldn’t communicate well” and “I would have liked to go out more but I got tense when I couldn’t figure out how to order things”

are examples of how students perceived their lack of language proficiency and how it hindered their satisfaction with the overall experience. Several students linked the language barrier to the faculty coordinator by expressing the idea that faculty should have better prepared them as to the language barrier and how specifically to navigate it.

The third-party provider was credited with providing the most satisfying experience according to student qualitative responses. The most enjoyable experience was identified as making new friends and establishing relationships. Nineteen of the 22 surveys identified this category as their most satisfying factor of the experience. Phrases such as “life-long connections,” finding a “new family” and “I will treasure the people I met for a lifetime” are examples from the qualitative responses that establish the importance of relationships for students. Students perceived the third-party provider as providing these relationship opportunities and credited the provider with making “great matches” for students and homestays. Almost all students identified their home-stay experiences as providing the greatest opportunities to establish meaningful relationships with local citizens.

Students also identified the importance of learning about a new culture and cultural norms as a common theme. “I never knew what I didn’t know about other cultures” supports the notion of students learning from and of others to increase their cultural competence while participating in a study abroad program. Another student shared, “I never thought about how alike we (US citizens) are to other cultures. I now believe people are people no matter where you go. I also believe it is my job to remember this and strive to share my culture while learning a new one.” This comment shows the growth mind set of this student in reference to becoming a culturally competent citizen who embraces other cultures as well as her own. This concept was reinforced with the comment from another student, “I wish every college student could study

abroad, I think it would make the world a smaller place with people who understand and respect each other.” Students mostly identified the International Center as the entity most responsible for providing the opportunity for students to study abroad and participate in culturally conscious activities that provided growth. Students credited the faculty coordinator at almost the same degree and used phrases like, “I’m glad she does this and gave me the opportunity to go” or “my coordinator made this possible and I hope she continues to give others the same opportunity.”

When analyzing the quantitative data for added validity, there was a wide range of response, with most students saying they agree the faculty director supported them in ways they found helpful. However, none of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the similar statement regarding the local service provider. In fact, most students strongly agreed that the local, third-party provider supported them in ways they found helpful. Most students agreed that the International Center supported them in ways they found helpful as indicated in Table 1 below.

Table 1*Frequency of Responses for Key Variables*

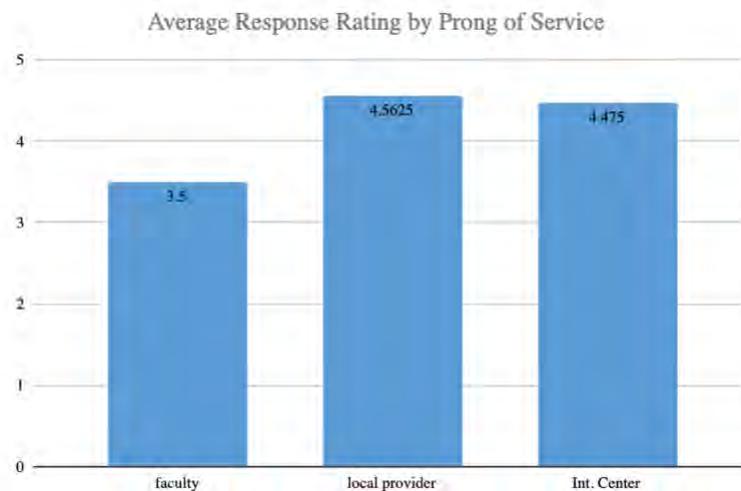
Variable	Ranking	Ranking Score	Percent
<i>faculty</i>	Strongly Disagree	1	12.5%
	Disagree	2	12.5%
	Neutral	3	12.5%
	Agree	4	37.5%
	Strongly Agree	5	25.0%
<i>coordinator</i>	Strongly Disagree	1	0.0%
	Disagree	2	0.0%
	Neutral	3	12.5%
	Agree	4	25.0%
	Strongly Agree	5	62.5%
<i>International Center</i>	Strongly Disagree	1	0.0%
	Disagree	2	12.5%
	Neutral	3	37.5%
	Agree	4	50.0%
	Strongly Agree	5	0.0%

It appears that most of the questions had a very high mean rating out of the maximum score of five. Questions six and 10, regarding the support of the faculty director and support of

the International Center both had lower mean ratings than the other survey questions. While each question pertained to a different aspect of the study abroad experience, each question can be grouped into one of the three prongs of service that contributed to the study abroad experience: the faculty director, the local service provider, and the International Center as noted below. The average ratings for each prong of service analyzed is identified in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2

Average Response Rating by Prong of Service



As noted in Figure 2, the analysis suggests the local service provider is perceived as the most supportive prong of service by the students with a 4.5625 average response rating by students. Comments from students included, “the staff in Ourense was beyond helpful.” Another student commented, “Very helpful and willing to help with whatever problems or situations I may have been in....”. “They were always willing to help us out! We could always count on them if needed.” Several students commented on the need to provide timely and accurate information concerning field trips and school placements. It is interesting to note more positive comments were noted in the second year of data with the smaller number of participants (8).

Students were generally less happy with their experience in the first year as opposed to the second year.

The next provider to analyze is the International Center with a 4.475 rating by students. One student commented, "The international center was helpful in doing what they needed to do for me on this trip." It is noteworthy to mention that most students did not provide any qualitative remarks when analyzing their experience with the International Center. Those who did comment provided such information as, "I never really interacted with them. However, I am sure they would have been very helpful." Or comments such as, "I don't have any direct examples of when they were helpful or not."

The final prong of service analyzed was the faculty member. The question asking for qualitative data provided the most comments from students of all service providers. The faculty member received 3.5 average ratings from students with the students participating in the first year offering a lower overall rating than the second year. Some students were positive in their comments such as, "I never once felt unsafe in her care especially when traveling to Spain initially." The student went on to add, "She was always available via text or email, and responded promptly to both." Another student commented, "...her communication was very poor." Yet another suggested, "I feel like the trip could have been more prepared with a detailed outline of all possible events that were potentially happening, such as travel plans and weekly meetings." Perhaps the most telling of comments may be found in one student's evaluation of performance, "She did a good job of helping us be independent, but also helping us out when we needed it."

Conclusion and Discussion

The most apparent limitation of this study is the number of participants. Since the purpose of the study was to analyze the service provided by a specific program, the number of possible subjects was limited. Comparison of similar programs across the university or in similar universities could add insight into the results. Additionally, extending the study to include more years of service could add additional data for analysis.

Student perceptions of service and university providers suggests they lack understanding of how the study abroad experience is organized. The findings clearly indicate students perceive the faculty member as the provider most responsible for the experience. An assumption that helping or supporting a student equates to managing all aspects of the experience without the input of the students emerged from the qualitative remarks. The question regarding service provided by the faculty member resulting in the most qualitative comments of all areas of service. It also represented the most range of quantitative responses. Students were more decisive about having a positive or negative experience with the faculty member than any other provider type. Additionally, students were more positive about their experience with the faculty member with less students participating in the experience. This would lead to the belief that study abroad experiences with fewer students leads to a more positive experience with faculty members. Furthermore, ratings for the performance of the faculty member were greater the second year of the experience suggesting longevity by a faculty member leads to a more positive experience for students.

Language represented the biggest challenge for students when studying abroad. Participants linked many perceived problems and frustrations with the inability to communicate effectively in the native language. This suggests universities and advisors need to do more to

compensate for language deficits of participants before and during the study abroad experience. In lieu of formal language courses, informal conversational instruction should be included in pre-departure training. Making students aware and providing the basic phrases of common conversations could help alleviate frustrations from students.

Additionally, the findings of this study reinforced the large pool of research crediting study abroad in aiding the development of cultural competency in young adults. Students identified forming relationships and discovering the nuances of the culture of others as helping them feel more worldly and connected to others. This emphasizes the importance of maintaining study abroad opportunities at higher education institutions. Resources need to be provided to support these programs. Work needs to be done to support and value study abroad by all stakeholders at the higher education level.

Upon analysis of all service providers, faculty, coordinator, and university center suggests students are more aware of service provided by faculty. This may be contributed to the direct amount of time faculty is in contact with students. Service coordinators have limited contact with students as most of the preparation for the experience is coordinated with the faculty member. Students are in personal contact with the university center even less. Yet it is the work and dedication of these two entities that allow for the existence of the experience. It is apparent that students are unaware of how a study abroad experience is created and base their perceptions on the person(s) they interact with daily. Helping students understand the complexities of creating the entire experience may be helpful in their perceptions of the entire experience.

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