**Studying Abroad Should Be a Mandatory Component of Undergraduate Education**

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St. Augustine is credited for saying, "The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page." This profound quote eloquently captures the essence of our interconnected global reality. Because of such factors as the rise of the Internet, the ease of global travel, and a dramatic increase in international trade, the world is becoming more interconnected than ever before. In the past, people could enjoy a successful career without moving from their home region, but now many people have jobs that involve some international interactions. Given these new conditions, it is essential that college and university students experience new cultures as part of their education. To achieve this objective and to emphasize the importance of intercultural studies, colleges and universities should require students to study abroad for at least one semester of their undergraduate education for its positive impact on students’ language learning and cultural awareness.

Firstly, the most obvious and immediate benefit of studying abroad lies in its facilitation in learning a new language. While students should prepare to study abroad by learning a new language in the classroom, thereby establishing a framework for future success, few experiences enhance language learning more than living in a country where it is used. As Kauffman et al. (1992) state, “Foreign settings may offer many new resources for instruction, practice, and evaluation. Teaching methods that take advantage of the local environments can certainly be expected to improve on classroom methods” (p.36). For example, when learning a new language in a classroom, students might practice ordering food at a restaurant or asking directions to a museum, while if studying abroad, they will have the opportunity to put these skills to test in real-world situations. In addition, a comparative study by Jochum (2014) on the oral proficiency level of study-abroad students versus at-home students provides further concrete evidence. In his discussion, Jochum concludes that study-abroad students who had similar proficiency level with at-home students before the study abroad program, demonstrated a much higher proficiency gain than their counterparts. Seventy-eight percent of study-abroad students have improved one proficiency level, while only 44% of at-home students achieved such progress (Jochum, 2014). Evidently, studying abroad provides students genuine and sufficient opportunities to apply language learned in the classroom in real life, which not only facilitates language acquisition but also enlightens students in a broader sense.

Furthermore, another salient benefit of studying abroad program is its contribution to students’ culture awareness. Studying abroad requires students to live and learn in a new culture that is different from their upbringing. In their analysis, Brewer and Cunningham (2009) conclude that real learning is often triggered by a serious dilemma that causes the individuals involved to question assumptions they may have held for their entire lives. When students study abroad, they would often encounter such a challenge when people hold different beliefs, and what they assume to be right remains under question. As Brewer and Cunningham demonstrate, students’ daily assumptions are challenged by the experience of living abroad, from simple concerns such as appropriate breakfast foods to more complex matters such as how societies should be organized and other cultural conventions. When they are shocked by how people in another culture behave and view things differently from their own, students are also given the opportunities to see and experience life in an alternative way. By experiencing a new culture firsthand, they will more deeply appreciate the unique features of both their host and home countries, as well as understand the repercussions of these cultural diversity. As the result, study-abroad students gain a fresh and profound understanding of culture incomparable to mere domestic study.

Though study abroad programs have various advantages, some may argue that a semester or year overseas may be regarded as only a vacation by the students. It bears some truth in claiming that some students treat studying abroad as a time for leisure rather than a rich academic experience. (The student is missing a detailed explanation of the counterargument here. He is also missing a citation for the counterargument - Conrad). However, the inappropriate actions of a few students should not invalidate study abroad programs as a whole or cause colleges to abandon their efforts in this regard. In fact, in a long-term study of 3,400 students, Dwyer and Peters (2004) found that the predominant participants said studying abroad had an impact on their world view (96 percent), increased their self-confidence (96 percent), and gave them the skill sets they needed for the career they chose (76 percent). The frequent comment from the students is, “It will change your life. You’ll come back a new person” (Dwyer & Peters, 2004, p. 56). Clearly, studying abroad is not just a party but a precious learning opportunity for most students. Moreover, to ensure that students make the best use of this experience, students’ home institutions should offer preparatory workshops and orientation seminars so that they can better utilize the opportunity by being prepared for the program and having a deeper understanding of how it connects with their current academic work. Studying abroad unites academic demands with the thrill of discovering a new culture, and students will gain immeasurably more from the experience if they are prepared prior to departure for what they will discover there.

To sum up, because of the tremendous gains in language and culture, students are highly recommended to participate in study abroad programs. Colleges and universities should require that their students take advantage of this opportunity while also aiding students in preparing for and maximizing their study abroad experiences. It is imperative that students learn to navigate the increasingly interconnected world by immersing themselves in diverse cultures as a fundamental component of their education. In a world made smaller and interdependent by technological advances, young talents with multilingual competence and global visions will be more prepared to succeed in their future careers.

**References**

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