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First, Do No Harm: Ideas for Mitigating Negative Community Impacts of Short-Term Study Abroad

By: Kathleen Schroeder, Cynthia Wood, Shari Galiardi, and Jenny Koehn

Abstract

This article presents the results from a research project on the host community impact of college students participating in university-sponsored international experiences. It finds that little reliable data is available on the impact that our students have on host communities. The article concludes that nondamaging international experiences require a substantial amount of planning, experienced group facilitation, and solid debriefing of students and community members. We recommend that geographers with a critical perspective and extensive foreign expertise should help guide the development of these experiences and urge their universities to screen study abroad for unintended negative outcomes on local communities.

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the results from a research project on the host community impact of college students participating in university-sponsored international experiences. It finds that little reliable data is available on the impact that our students have on host communities. The article concludes that nondamaging international experiences require a substantial amount of planning, experienced group facilitation, and solid debriefing of students and community members. We recommend that geographers with a critical perspective and extensive foreign expertise should help guide the development of these experiences and urge their universities to screen study abroad for unintended negative outcomes on local communities.

ARTICLE

Introduction

In the United States, internationalization is an important component of the mission statements of many colleges and universities, and the numbers reflect this commitment as student participation in study abroad has grown 150 percent over the past decade (Institute of International Education 2007). In the President's Column of the Association of American Geographers (AAG) newsletter, Victoria Lawson (2005) comments on this trend and the contributions that geographers are well positioned to make to an internationalized research and teaching agenda across campuses.

With an increased emphasis on internationalization, U.S. institutions are looking to expand their offerings beyond the typical model where language students spend a semester in a European country. Students across campuses are encouraged to go abroad in a growing variety of models that can range from one-week alternative spring break service projects to year-long exchanges. Demand for study-abroad opportunities is increasing and the Lincoln Commission recently proposed sending one million Americans abroad by 2016 (Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program 2005).

Where are all these students going? Presently, the United Kingdom remains the number-one-ranked destination for U.S. students, but China is now a top-ten destination as are Mexico and Costa Rica. Countries on the list of the top-twenty destinations include South Africa, Brazil, and Ecuador (Institute of International Education 2007). International offerings at a typical mid-sized public institution in the United States include programs to locations as diverse as Ecuador, India, New Zealand, and Ghana. The Lincoln Commission recommends that these nontraditional locations become an increasing percentage of study-abroad destinations. Following the recommendations of the Lincoln Commission, the Simon Act currently awaiting approval in Congress mandates “diversifying locations of study abroad, particularly in developing countries” (NAFSA 2008).

What has been virtually ignored as short-term study abroad has grown on college campuses is a critical examination of the impact of these programs on the communities that students visit.¹ The most recent edition of the Forum on Education Abroad's Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad (2008, 19), for example, makes no recommendations on mitigating the effects of study abroad on local communities, suggesting only that the organization sending students “respect the cultures and values of the countries in which it operates.” The implications of a group going to London are significantly different than going to a remote village in China, but increasingly universities are offering and students are choosing programs that take them far off the beaten track, with unexamined and unintended consequences for host communities. Given the drive to increase the number of students going abroad, it is urgent that these consequences be considered by both institutions and faculty in the design and implementation of short-term study-abroad programs.²

In this article, we draw attention to the numerous and often unforeseen ways that students might impact local communities. We have developed this inquiry through an examination of the relevant bodies of literature and from ongoing research and discussions with a wide variety of stakeholders involved in short-term study abroad on and off our campus. We conclude with six recommendations that we encourage faculty to take to their home institutions.

What Are the Impacts on Local Communities?

Considering how difficult it is to collect information on the topic, it should not be surprising that we have virtually no idea of how students' impact places—particularly the small, rural, research sites that many geographers are likely to take our students. David Zurick (1992) and other geographers have

examined sustainable tourism, but not with a specific eye towards the impact that our own students are having.

Many of the potential negative impacts of foreign visitors are highlighted by the literature on tourism, especially its economic, social, and cultural effects (Archer, Cooper, and Ruhanen 2005; McLaren 2006). Shaw and Williams (2002) and Lew, Hall, and A. Williams (2004) provide comprehensive examinations of tourism from a geographic perspective. While we believe that there are significant differences between study abroad and tourism, in considering the potential negative impacts on host communities there are many similarities. Like tourism, study abroad “creates impacts and consequences; we cannot prevent these, but need to plan and manage to minimize the negative impacts and emphasize the positive impacts” (Archer, Cooper, and Ruhanen 2005, 79). And as with tourism, these impacts occur because study abroad “brings about an intermingling of people from diverse social and cultural backgrounds, and also a considerable spatial redistribution of spending power, which has a significant impact on the economy of the destination” (Archer, Cooper, and Ruhanen 2005, 79). It is possible that even more than most tourism, study abroad is “by its very nature... attracted to unique and fragile environments and societies and... in some cases the economic benefits [to host communities] may be offset by adverse and previously unmeasured environmental and social consequences” (Archer, Cooper, and Ruhanen 2005, 79).

The tourism literature suggests that short-term study-abroad programs may do damage to their host communities, and points to an array of questions that we should ask in order to evaluate the potential for such negative impacts, including the following:

Where does the food/water/housing for our students come from? Do we impose any hardship on local people, such as water shortages? What about garbage disposal and pollution? Is land being used for visitors rather than local needs?

Does the economic impact of study abroad promote economic inequality in the community? Do foreigners or local elites own or manage the hotels that students occupy during their visit? If “home stays” are part of the study abroad, do students live in middle-class homes, so that poorer people do not receive any economic benefit and income inequality is worsened? Are guides and drivers outsiders or wealthier members of the community? Do local prices go up as a result of the student visit? The giving of gifts can contribute to similar inequalities, however well-intentioned—can nonmaterial gifts be given instead, or gifts to the community as a whole?

Do student visits contribute to economies of dependency on outsiders, orienting those economies to pleasing or providing pleasure for wealthy foreigners rather than to local needs?

Is there a “season” for foreign visitors to come to the area, such that student visits contribute to a “boom and bust” cycle in the local economy? Is there any way to mitigate this effect?

Do students' patterns of consumption (both during and before the visit) contribute to problems in the community? The “demonstration effect” of students bringing high-end travel gear, lots of clothes, spending money easily on restaurants, giving gifts, etc. may create resentment, the perception of

American students as wealthy consumers with no responsibilities at home (McLaren 2006), or the desire in local people (especially youth) to leave the community so that they can make money to buy similar goods and services. Even traveling on an airplane or simply traveling away from home can create these problems among people who do not have that option.

Are local people excluded from any of the areas where students are encouraged or allowed to go?

Are students well-behaved and respectful in terms of the local culture? Do they dress inappropriately, or otherwise commit cultural offenses that will anger, distress, or shock people in the local community? Do students see culture, indigeneity, and the “authenticity” of local people as commodities to be consumed? What other cultural impacts result from student visits? Cultural differences in themselves are likely sources of confusion and conflict if unanticipated.

Do students smoke, drink, or do drugs during their visit? The effect of these behaviors can range from being poor role models for local youth to bringing new addictions to the community.

Are other expressions of privilege demonstrated by students during their visit, such as doing things “our” way, eating “our” food, playing “our” music, requiring things to be done on “our” schedule?

How well are students prepared to understand the community they are visiting? Do they bring damaging stereotypes with them that can be countered before, during, and after the program? These stereotypes might be as narrow as “Bolivians,” but for most students are more likely to be broader, such as “poor people,” “indigenous people,” or “people in developing countries,” as well as racist and exoticizing images of people in out-of-the-way places.

Are there human rights issues already present that are exacerbated by the presence of foreign visitors?

Does anything about the students' presence or activities reinforce a negative self-image for local people, for example that Americans are smarter, more competent, more attractive? Is there any way their presence could promote a positive self-image instead?

There are many other questions that can and should be asked when considering the effects of short-term study abroad on local communities. Many of these are place-specific and evaluation requires local knowledge. Consulting local people on these questions may be helpful, but is unlikely to give a complete picture. The economic stake of having visitors return may be very high, so there is incentive to give positive reviews of the local experience of students and the impacts of their presence. Politeness compels most people to respond favorably when asked if student visits have had a positive effect on the community. And of course, most people are not trained to detect or analyze the effect of visitors on local communities. Direct observation can also be helpful, but must be considered from a critical perspective as well. Local people may be observed to smile and appear happy when they are genuinely happy, but also when they have little choice about it, as “being happy” is required for visitors to spend money, give gifts, or come back.

Research Design and Methods

These issues prompted the development of a research team (composed of faculty members, student development staff, and a student) at Appalachian State University to look at the impact of our students on the places that they visited. In the course of our research, we have examined one-week alternative spring break service projects, as well as other short-term study-abroad programs, especially non-traditional ones, through a review of data on program destination and continuity, surveys of students, interviews with host community partners, and focus groups with faculty and staff leading study-abroad programs.

The one-week international alternative spring break service study-abroad programs offer one hour of academic credit, but are not faculty-led. With the guidance of the campus-based volunteer and service-learning program, students develop the programs, recruit other students to participate and find a faculty partner to accompany the group. Unlike many alternative spring break programs across the country, there is academic coursework and substantial preparation and reflection required of students before and during the program abroad. From 2006 to 2008 ten alternative spring break programs were implemented in the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Panama, Jamaica, and Belize. A total of 125 students participated over that time period; some have returned for more than one year. Of these 125, twenty have subsequently enrolled in a semester-long international program. This enrollment is significantly higher than for the population of students at large and may support the argument that international alternative spring breaks and other short-term study-abroad programs can serve as gateways to longer study-abroad experiences.

In addition to alternative spring breaks, there are a significant number of other short-term study-abroad programs at our university, which are designed and implemented by faculty and professional staff. These programs all carry academic credit, with coursework completed before, during, and after the program abroad. The “abroad” components of such programs occur at various times depending on the program, including winter and spring break, but most commonly are completed during the summer.

The research team collected data from four sources hoping to catch a glimpse of how students impact the communities that they visited:

In 2007 we conducted semistructured interviews with the faculty and professional staff partners who participated on alternative spring break programs.

That same year we conducted semistructured interviews with host agency personnel. These interviews were conducted by the faculty and staff partners on each program.

We also analyzed data from a required student survey from the international alternative spring breaks.

In 2008 we conducted a series of focus groups with a wider range of faculty and professional staff who have led study-abroad courses (not all of which included a service-learning component).

In these group discussions, we hoped to see if participants were concerned about the impacts that their students are having on host communities and, if so, what they did to mitigate potential damage. In this

research we were especially concerned about issues of equity and, in particular, who benefited locally from the students' presence in the community.

Results

Faculty and Professional Staff Interviews

The faculty and professional staff who served as partners for the alternative spring break programs in 2007 included three people who had considerable international experience and one who had no previous international travel experience. One faculty member was a geography professor. Two of the four participants expressed some skepticism about the positive impact on communities that they expected from the program before they departed.

After they returned, all four faculty and professional staff partners were interviewed. All reported favorable impressions of the student impact on the communities they served. When asked why they thought that students were well received in their host communities, their responses varied. One explained that they had worked closely with a successful U.S. Peace Corps volunteer that was living in the host community as they were setting up their program. The volunteer had done an excellent job of preparing both the students and the host community for the visit. Others commented that the agencies that they were volunteering with played similar roles in preparing both students and the communities for the exchanges. One faculty member commented that the host community was so inundated with volunteers that he doubted that his particular group could have any negative impact.

With regard to issues of how equitably the benefits of the exchange were shared within the communities, two faculty and professional staff partners noticed significant effort by the host agency to make sure that the tangible benefits of the students' presence were shared within the community. One commented about the particular effort of the family that was hosting them to make sure that the students stopped by the stores that were owned and run by other families. However, another noticed that the project that they were working with seemed to be exacerbating inequality.

Host Agency Interviews

In 2007 faculty and professional staff partners on the alternative spring break programs were asked to interview representatives of their host agency to try to determine the possible negative impacts that student groups could have, phrased in terms of how the programs might be improved. These interviews were shared with members of the research team when the groups returned to campus. In all cases, the representatives of the host agencies said that student groups provided needed assistance and, in some cases, a significant revenue stream for their projects. This result was expected and not terribly helpful. Several of the faculty and professional staff partners pushed their interview subjects a bit more by asking about the negative impacts of other student groups in the past. One host agency representative complained about the late night drinking activities of other student groups.

Student Participant Surveys

Completion of a post-experience survey is a requirement for alternative spring break participants. The research group collected fifty-four completed surveys from the 2007 international alternative spring break participants. Students were asked if they believed that their group had an impact in the community in which they worked. All students responded either “strongly agree” or “agree” on a five-point Likert scale. When prompted to provide details of the intangible impacts of their programs (impacts other than money and physical labor), some students felt that they reduced local people's negative stereotypes about Americans and that they helped local people feel more pride in their communities. Student surveys were not particularly good instruments for prompting reflection on the possible negative impact that their presence might cause (for example, demonstration effects and exacerbation of existing inequality). However, one professional staff partner commented that serious discussion of these concerns was shared during time set aside for reflection while they were in the host community.

Focus Groups with Faculty and Staff

In order to expand our research beyond the experiences of alternative spring break programs, four one-time focus groups were completed in 2008 with faculty and staff who had led or accompanied short-term study-abroad programs through the university's Office of International Education and Development in the previous five years. All programs are organized by the group's facilitator—vendors are not used on our campus. Of the forty-one faculty and staff invited to participate, twenty-six participated. Staff participants were student development professionals from a variety of offices across campus and faculty were from numerous departments, with representatives from all colleges at the university. The research team intentionally sought out participants who had led programs to “vulnerable” places: all who had led or facilitated programs in Latin America, Africa, and Asia were asked to participate, as well as one that visited the Maori in New Zealand. However, many who had been to less vulnerable places in Europe and Australia were also asked. When there was a choice, faculty and staff who had led multiple programs with larger numbers of students were asked to participate over those with fewer numbers and less experience. Participants ranged in experience from second-year assistant professors who had led one program to full professors who have been leading programs for over twenty years.

One striking finding was that most participants had not seriously considered the negative impacts that their students might have abroad when they were planning their program, even those who were able to articulate potential negative effects during the focus groups. This was attributed to the real needs of pressing program logistics, including planning the syllabus. Of those who did plan for potentially negative impacts of their program, the most common measure was developing group guidelines or setting up penalties (including sending students home) for destructive behavior related to alcohol consumption. Participants were nearly unanimous in their view that alcohol abuse contributed

substantially to poor student behavior and increased the likelihood that the students would have a negative impact on the community they visited.

However, few participants went beyond thinking about the negative impact that alcohol can have to consider other unintended negative consequences. Few expressed concern over exacerbating income inequality, though some commented on the demonstration effects of bringing wealthy students into poor communities. In general, virtually all participants assumed or asserted that economic repercussions were positive, and had considered few or no cultural or social effects of the study-abroad program they led. Even senior faculty members with extensive international experience and doctorates in a social science discipline had not thought through the implications for host communities of their visits. However, there were a few faculty and staff (not always the most experienced) who did discuss negative effects, some they had actually seen, others that they feared. Once these were mentioned in the focus groups, most participants were interested in hearing about issues they had not considered, and all were actively concerned about the effects of student visits on host communities.

The few who mentioned negative impacts were concerned primarily with economic issues that result in inequity or dependency in host communities, though there were also concerns about cultural impacts. Home stays in middle-class housing, unequal distribution of gifts, the demonstration effect of student consumption, and reliance upon relatively wealthy visitors to solve local problems were all discussed. One participant had put a hold on taking students to an area he had visited for decades, because he saw major signs of dependency, on him and the relationships his programs had established in the community, for addressing local concerns, especially in providing money. One had stopped going to areas that were geographically and culturally isolated because he feared the effect of his programs on those communities, which he perceived as particularly vulnerable. On the other hand, one faculty member commented that ten more students from our university going to Madrid were not going to have much of an impact on local inhabitants.

These focus groups indicate that faculty and staff who lead short-term study-abroad programs are generally unaware of possible negative impacts on host communities and do not consider the effects of their programs, with the exception of bad behavior resulting from student abuse of alcohol. However, once potential negative impacts came up in discussion, virtually all were receptive to considering these impacts and thinking about how to mitigate them.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Although this research project is still in its early stages, we feel comfortable drawing some basic conclusions and making some general recommendations. As researchers, we have been pleased with how receptive stakeholders are to making improvements to study abroad in terms of its effects on host communities. We are hopeful, therefore, that with time and effort many of these recommendations will become standard practice at universities and colleges engaged in such programs.

Institutional Commitment

Colleges and universities must make institutional commitments to evaluating and mitigating the negative impacts of short-term study abroad on host communities. The commitment of individual leaders of such programs is necessary, but not sufficient to achieve this goal, as institutions must provide training, support, and review of programs to ensure that host communities are not harmed by our students' education abroad. As research in this previously unexplored aspect of study abroad develops, institutions can help program leaders learn about potential negative impacts of study abroad. In those institutions that use vendors to provide short-term study abroad, this commitment must be transmitted to vendors, and contracts issued only to those that meet this new criteria.

Knowledgeable Program Leaders

Program leaders and administrators must become as knowledgeable as possible about host communities and the ways they may be harmed by short-term study abroad, in order to predict and evaluate potential negative impacts. This process is likely to be helped tremendously by the involvement of experienced faculty. This does not necessarily mean that such faculty must lead every program since they are not necessarily sensitive or trained to observe the impacts on communities. A committed program leader may be able to reduce such effects through serious study and consultation with faculty as well as members of the community. Whenever possible, however, the expertise of faculty knowledgeable about the community or the area to which students are traveling should be involved in the planning of the program, and in evaluating potential impacts. Superficial observation is no substitute for knowledge and analysis resulting from training in the field.

Student and Community Preparation

Students must be prepared and guided during the program so that they become active participants in evaluating and preventing negative impacts on host communities. Preparation and work during the program has three components.

First, knowledge of the community must be built so that students will understand, insofar as possible, how and why things work the way they do in that area, including the likely reaction to Americans and effects of students' presence there. Through guest lectures, readings, films, and pre-program group presentations, much of this can be accomplished and will allow service to be well-integrated with cultural learning.

Second, the group must engage in systematic analyses of the many ways outsiders can affect any community, how power dynamics are likely to come into play within and between the host community and the student group, the special vulnerabilities of the community being visited, and ways to minimize negative impacts. This analysis must include the (gentle!) lesson that good intentions do not necessarily prevent harm—those intentions must be armed with knowledge, sensitivity, humility, and commitment.

Facilitating power/privilege simulation activities, conducting panel discussions with previous participants, engaging in frank group discussions, and requiring reflection/reaction papers from the students before departure can all assist with teaching these important lessons before engaging with the host community.

Third, group cohesion and a shared commitment to respect and share with the host community in a spirit of mutual learning, and an exchange of equals must be developed. This kind of cohesion and commitment must be created through activities, sharing and reflection both before and during the program. Before the program, students might engage in group projects about the culture, meet with students who have been on the program before, and discuss their likely reactions to the culture(s) they will be experiencing. Building a group contract about behaviors on the program that will mitigate potential negative impacts will also make for a more successful program generally. Once abroad, home stays to encourage cultural immersion, making time in the program to be with local people in contexts that allow for sharing, using local languages when possible, structuring evening reflection time that allows for open discussion, and encouraging a group journal and/or individual journals are among the practices that are fundamental to creating groups that will be sensitive to and work to prevent negative impacts on the community being visited, as well as encouraging good cultural exchange.

Teaching students how to journal prior to departure is both an important academic and life skill. Instructors should develop structured journal questions that allow reflection to take a deeper, more critical perspective, rather than just reporting on the experience. Varying the reflection processes throughout the experience will accommodate various learning styles and encourage deeper, more powerful learning. Many ideas for reflection can be found on the Campus Compact (<http://www.compact.org>) and the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (<http://www.servicelearning.org>) Web sites.

Finally, consult with and prepare the community, in advance of the visit. Members of the host community may have good suggestions for minimizing negative effects, but not necessarily. They are as unlikely as students to have an understanding of foreigners, however interested they may be. If members of the community have some understanding of the students' culture, some potential conflicts and distress may be reduced. If a local university or agency is part of the study-abroad program, they should also be brought into discussions of the effects of the program on local people, something that they may not have thought about any more than our institutions have. Ultimately, host communities should have control over if and how student groups should visit and study.

Consider Not Going

Consider not going on certain programs and reducing the numbers of students going overseas. Given the potential environmental, social, and cultural costs of study abroad, there are some places there is just no responsible way to visit. Programs with the highest probability of harm to the host communities should simply not be developed, despite the recommendation of the Lincoln Commission and student demand. These locations may not always be obvious. The environmental impact of visiting some

locations may be profound even when the cultural effect might be minimal. Some places may be visited so much that it seems they cannot be harmed—but the cumulative impact of many visitors to a small place may be cause to hold back from going there. Attention to the cumulative impact as well as the higher investment in time of responsible study abroad also suggests that the number of programs as well as the number of students on each program should be reduced. With greater understanding of student learning outcomes and how they can be applied, this reduction in numbers might be used to improve the quality of short-term study abroad.

Long-Term Relationships

Establish long-term commitments to specific communities. Most of the recommendations above are ultimately dependent on this; while many of the negative effects of study abroad can be anticipated with sufficient preparation, others cannot. Only by knowing people and learning about a community over time can these unanticipated impacts be detected and mutual trust created such that problems can be discussed and addressed. This is not a panacea—a long-term relationship may in itself become a problem if it becomes a dependent one. But the dangers of “drive by” study-abroad programs are too clear to be continued, once the effects on host communities are acknowledged. We should be clear that “drive by” is not the same as a program with a short duration. Programs that last as little as a week can be long-term provided the institution maintains a relationship with the host community. Conversely, simply because a group stays in a particular place for an extended period of time does not ensure an equitable long-term relationship.

Institutional Review of Study Abroad

U.S. colleges and universities should develop institutional review boards (IRBs) to screen international experiences for unintended negative impacts that short-term study abroad might have. IRBs already exist across campuses to ensure that faculty research does not endanger the health or safety of our research subjects. The same consideration should be given to communities that host our students abroad. These IRBs should be composed of faculty with academic expertise in vulnerable areas as well as those with experience in study-abroad programs.

Though the effects of short-term study abroad pale in comparison to the overall impact of other forms of travel from the U.S., academic institutions bear a special responsibility to engage in ethical relationships with communities hosting our students during study abroad. Understanding and working to mitigate the negative impacts of study abroad on host communities must become part of how we understand what we do when our colleges and universities sponsor such programs.

We are all too aware that this research raises as many questions as it answers. How exactly does one prevent dependency from developing in a long-term study-abroad relationship? How do we determine the cultural impact over time of students' study abroad? How do we spend money to feed and house

students without increasing income inequalities? These are difficult questions, and the answers to some of them may not even be possible. But we believe that if these questions are not asked, if the impacts on local communities of study abroad continue to be ignored, that we will without a doubt be engaged in the pursuit of academic goals at the expense of people who have no choice about the matter. Many of the answers to these questions are held within our collective knowledge of the places with which we have deep relationships. Our long-term commitments to the places we have studied provide the starting point for what we hope will be long and fruitful conversation.

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Notes

1. Research on the effects of study abroad on students remains underdeveloped. How long do students need to be abroad before they start to gain cross-cultural skills? What experiences and assignments are necessary to meet learning objectives? Of the few studies that examine the impact on students, some are very disturbing. Gmelch (2004) studied the journals of students enrolled in anthropology classes at the University of Innsbruck. Students attended classes Monday through Thursday and traveled on the weekends. Analysis of student journals found that they were surprisingly shallow, naive, and simplistic; students gained very little from simply traveling.
2. Short-term study abroad is the largest growing proportion of international programs at this time, and, in our view, much more likely to have negative impacts on host communities than individual or small groups of students who go on semester or year-long study abroad at a foreign university.

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