

Study Away with SFA: The Opportunity for Accessible Cross Cultural Learning

Cat Davis, Terra Newsom, and Skylar Perry
Department of Education Studies, Stephen F. Austin State University
Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Sarah M. Straub



Abstract

Study Away was proposed by our professor as an accessible alternative to traditional study abroad programs. Accessible because it is more affordable and it opens up this crosscultural opportunity to students who may be undocumented.

We traveled the country for five weeks in a Mercedes sprinter van exploring places such as Palo Duro Canyon State Park, Albuquerque, the Great Lakes, New York City, the Appalachian Mountains, and New Orleans to name a few.

Throughout, we engaged in critical conversations and opportunities for self-growth. This presentation will share our perspectives regarding study away as it compares to study abroad.

Introduction

The overall purpose of this initial trip was to serve as a pilot for Study Away with SFA: an accessible, popular alternative to study abroad offered to SFA students in a variety of disciplines.

The students traveled in a Mercedes sprinter van for five weeks during summer 2022. They went west through Texas, New Mexico and Colorado and then traveled east with stops in Nebraska, Illinois, and Ohio before stopping at our furthest point - New York City. From there, students traveled through Hershey, Gettysburg, Washington, D.C., Williamsburg, and Asheville to Atlanta. Then, drove through to New Orleans before the last stop along the Mississippi River in Natchez.

The course provided students with opportunities to engage with various social studies curriculums including ProjectWILD and Stanford History Education Group's Reading Like a Historian. Students also engaged in critical conversations about the United States' multiculturalism in a book club on George Takaki's *A Different Mirror*.

Literature Review

Studying away is an opportunity to gain experience or perspective to develop one's future self. It is a time to immerse in the various cultures that make up the country today. The short-term benefits of study-away programs allow faculty to develop a controlled learning environment that is purposeful and centered on student activities (Mapp, 2012). Study away programs heighten the focus on particular skills while amplifying traits of one's unique self.

The flexibility and accessibility engage a variety of students in universities. The short-term aspect of study-away programs appeals to students with limited flexibility in financial or academic standards, student-athletes with complex schedules, students who cannot travel internationally, and graduate students that may not have the availability for traditional study abroad programs (Mapp, 2012).

Learning within one's home country produces options for a more significant number of students. With many short-term programs continuing to occur on semester breaks, the learning can continue to meet the needs of students while creating the desired change (Mapp, 2012).

The educational development is progressed through multicultural experiences and new perspectives while allowing students to expand on traits of their individuality. Focused learning in short-term programs can help build confidence, independence, and excitement needed for an individual's long-term experience (Mapp, 2012).

Studying away is a time to learn and appreciate many cultures, embrace the opportunities, explore a home through educational experiences, develop relationships, and seek the significant aspects that define the uniqueness of each student.

Methods

The research addressed two questions:

1. What was the perceived impact of participation in this program?
2. How does this impact compare with documented benefits of a traditional study abroad program?

Program participants received pre- and post-surveys as well as completed journaling activities and a final programmatic evaluative essay. The students also created a shared photo and video space for access so the researchers have access to those items as well. The specific focus would be on perceived impact when compared to research regarding the benefits of study abroad programs.

Selected Results

Pre-Survey

Why did you participate in this program? (Check all that apply)

Response	# responses
Learn about the USA/multitude	8 (100%)
Opportunity to travel	8 (100%)
Receive more independence	2 (25%)
Prepare for graduate school	1 (12.5%)
Enhance resume, increase job	7 (87.5%)
Learn more about yourself	7 (87.5%)
Meet new people	6 (75%)

Post-Survey

Study away has made me more receptive to different ideas and ways of seeing the world.

Response	# responses
1	0 (0%)
2	0 (0%)
3	0 (0%)
4	3 (37.5%)
5	5 (62.5%)

Journals

"We did something I've dreamed of doing. Our group toured the ancient Pueblo cliff dwellings. I can't tell you how many times I've seen pictures but they do them no justice. It was amazing seeing and learning about ancient civilizations. We learned about the multiculturalism within the ancient Pueblos in Mesa Verde... Our tour guides name was Gianna and she was amazing. Since I have debated becoming a park ranger for awhile now, I asked some questions how she did it."

"One thing that stood out to the me was the little boy singing, because he sang 'Folsom Prison Blues' by Johnny Cash in Spanish. I love Johnny Cash so I thought it was cool."

"We all hung out and [redacted] and I had a really good talk just about about anything and everything. Even though we don't have the same views we are both open minded and communicate well."

"The plantation was very interesting. You were able to visualize everything we learned in school. To be honest it was what I expected it to look like; the living quarters, work-days, and stories from people who were enslaved."

"We danced in the streets to a live jazz band who played 'When the Saints Go Marching In.'"

Essay

"The ability to travel across the United States allowed me to reflect on my past, present, and future experiences... It strengthened my independence, confidence, and adventurous side... I wanted to develop these critical traits before making the big jump to a new home for my future career."

"The friendships I have made for life, connections for my career in education, and the memories this trip will forever hold are reasons why I will always recommend jumping at any any opportunity that even slightly holds excitement or wonder for you."

Conclusion

Ultimately, we recruited 50% seniors, 25% juniors, 12.5% sophomores and 12.5% freshmen. The majority of our students majored in Interdisciplinary Studies, EC-6, with Biology, Business Management, History, and Liberal Studies also represented. When asked why they had Straub 2 signed up for the program, the majority responded with reasons that paralleled what the research shows as motivations for study abroad: opportunity to travel, multicultural experiences, to gain independence, etc (Institute for the International Education of Students, 2022).

Likewise, the non-cognitive benefits of study away mirrored the perceived benefits of study abroad. The benefits, as outlined by NC State University's Office of Global Engagement (2022) include development in the areas of intercultural communication, adaptability, and problem-solving. So did the Study Away trip contribute to the personal growth of our students.

Selected Images



Our first hike to The Lighthouse through Palo Duro Canyon State Park.



Skylar and Terra facilitating a lesson based on *Out of School and Into Nature: The Anna Comstock Story*.



Attending the Broadway Show *American Buffalo* in New York City.



Exploring the Boulder Journey school to learn more about the Reggio Emilia approach.



Cat pictured at the Long House during a tour with Ranger Gianna at Mesa Verde National Park.



One of our Campfire Chats on Ronald Takaki's *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*.

Selected References

- Institute for the International Education of Students. (n.d.). *Benefits of Study Abroad*. Retrieved August 31, 2022, from <https://www.iesabroad.org/study-abroad/benefits>
- Mapp, S. C. (2012). EFFECT OF SHORT-TERM STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS ON STUDENTS' CULTURAL ADAPTABILITY. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 48(4), 727-737. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42000559>
- NC State University Office of Global Engagement. (2022). *Benefits of Studying Abroad - Study Abroad*. Retrieved August 31, 2022, from <https://studyabroad.ncsu.edu/benefits-of-studying-abroad/>

Acknowledgements

This program was funded by the President's Innovation Fund, the James I. Perkins Supplemental Travel Fund, the Montgomery Professorship, and the Department of Education Studies. IRB Case Number; AY 2022-2241. The publication is in review with TxEP.