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# UNDERSTADING "INTERNATIONAL": FACULTY PERSPECTIVES ON STUDY ABROAD AND GLOBAL STUDIES EDUCATION

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UNDERSTANDING "INTERNATIONAL": FACULTY PERSPECTIVES ON STUDY ABROAD AND GLOBAL  
STUDIES EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Little research has been devoted to critiques of study abroad programming coming from faculty perspectives. This research examines faculty critiques of study abroad arising from proposed changes in general studies education that would allow students to substitute study abroad for "global studies" coursework that specifically covers topics related to non-Western societies. While faculty are generally supportive of study abroad, opposition to this proposed policy change highlight questions of study abroad's role in higher education.

Keywords: Study Abroad; Ethnography; Institutional Ethnography; Global Studies; General Education; Faculty

## INTRODUCTION: STUDY ABROAD AS EXPERIENCE

Study abroad plays a formative role in American higher education, and tremendous efforts are being made to bolster the growth of these programs in schools nation-wide. An increased desire for global campuses and internationally competent students—and, perhaps, for new areas of financial growth—has translated into student programming that emphasize both the ease and accessibility of international travel and the necessity of studying abroad in a competitive business environment. At the same time, study abroad (defined generally) permits several definitions in how it affects the lives and practices that are compose the modern university. Study abroad is a system, a network of administrators, faculty directors, students, international contacts, and others that collaborate to create learning experiences. It also functions as a community, where students find common kinship and look to each other for mentoring and advice. Study abroad should also be seen as constituting a set of experiences that are formed before, during, and after a student goes abroad.

A substantial body of research has examined student experiences during study abroad, and several works have been critical of the "authentic" cultural immersion that study abroad experiences ostensibly give to students. Gerardo Ramírez's (2013) reflective accounts of his interactions with American study abroad programs and students abroad demonstrate institutional efforts to tailor student experiences to meet cultural expectations, deliberately erasing "undesirable" parts of daily life in Mexico City. Research examining students in a host family situation—purportedly the most immersive of study abroad experiences (Engle and Engle 2009)—argues that student-host dynamics are fundamentally altered by the presence of

the student and should be questioned as being truly immersive experiences (Wilkinson 2002; Doerr 2013). While the promise of total immersion in a host culture remains a standing promise of many study abroad programs, research continues to problematize these notions.

Despite the importance of university faculty members in the development and leading of study abroad programs, faculty perspectives of study abroad remain underrepresented in study abroad scholarship. One study conducted by Matthew Goode (2008) argues that faculty directors tend to be unprepared in guiding students through intercultural engagement during the study abroad trip. Moreover, despite faculty interest in directing study abroad, training for study abroad directing is generally limited to workshops. Much of the standing literature on faculty roles in study abroad is developmental in nature, explicitly offering ways in which faculty members can be more effective as leaders and mentors in the study abroad process.

While research on faculty perspectives is relatively rare, faculty perspectives which are critical of the study abroad institution are rarer still. This seems reflective of my own experiences with higher education; in my six years of college, I am hard pressed to think of any critiques of study abroad coming from students, faculty, or administration. Recent considerations of policy changes in undergraduate education requirements at Illinois State University present an opportunity where faculty members who are not entirely satisfied with study abroad's role in education can be examined.

## BACKGROUND

In order to satisfy requirements for graduation, all Illinois State University undergraduates must complete one course designated as global studies. Classes of this type

were previously designated as "AMALI," specifically referring to classes which covered content related to studies of Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, and the Indigenous Peoples of the world; while the actual designation has changed, this focus on non-western history, geography, culture, etc. has remained unchanged. While this requirement currently stands, recent proposals intend to offer other alternatives that students could pursue to satisfy the global studies education requirement. Among other alternatives, these changes would allow students to satisfy the requirement through completion of an approved, credit-bearing study abroad experience.

Arguments in favor of these changes by faculty members state that the current requirements do not do enough to encourage students to study abroad, and that the new requirements may allow students to include study abroad into schedules that would otherwise be too rigid to allow it. Moreover, it is considered that study abroad fulfills the same general requirements as general studies courses, giving students an opportunity to engage new perspectives. However, some professors—particularly those teaching classes in AMALI areas—have opposed these changes. It is argued that allowing students to "opt out" of global studies courses effectively marginalize non-western perspectives that they may not otherwise engage in the course of their general studies or major education. Concerns have also been raised that these changes give short term study abroad programs (lasting from two weeks to a month) the same weight as semester long classes. These reservations with the proposed changes are effectively reservations about study abroad programming, especially considering that the majority of students abroad at ISU participate in short term programs and travel to destinations in western Europe.

While arguments exist for both sides of the issue, I was especially surprised to see faculty coming out in opposition to study abroad promotion. Hearing and seeing professors critique study abroad was something that, at least in my experiences, was unprecedented. Even more surprising was that the same professors raising these critiques were also generally in support of promoting study abroad. The developments surrounding the proposed changes to the global studies requirement brought about a unique opportunity to look at faculty who did not necessarily see the promotion of study abroad as a universal maxim, and the course of my research on ISU study abroad shifted to focus on these critiques and how they defined the role of study abroad in an international education.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Interviews*

Research for this project was primarily conducted through interviews with three Illinois State University faculty and personnel members. Each interview took place in the interviewee's office, lasted approximately 20 minutes, and was audio-recorded with interviewee consent; one interview was transcribed in full. As employees of a public university being interviewed about their work at the university, interviewees were also asked if they would consent to a disclosure of their identity. They were made aware of the nature of this project and their involvement in it as well as its submission into a public archive through the Ethnography of the University Initiative, and each consented to a disclosure of their identities in this report. Although I don't feel it was absolutely necessary to include real names in this report, the disclosure of their particular roles in the university (which is of interest to this research) would have made them easily identifiable by interested readers. In short, I wanted to be up-front and honest with my

participants about the nature of this research, rather than make a token and superficial attempt at anonymization. As this could be seen as a somewhat sensitive topic, I would like to thank the participants for their involvement in this work.

Rather than selecting faculty members at random, I was specifically interested in talking to faculty and personnel linked to ISU study abroad in some form or fashion. Either through their jobs in the university or through personal interest, each of the individuals described in this report was involved in the development or promotion of study abroad programming. The interviews I conducted were centered primarily around questions concerning the interviewees' thoughts and experiences on study abroad: what were the benefits of students going abroad, what is the university's attitudes towards study abroad, what practices and plans went into creating study abroad content, etc. (A full set of questions for my first interview are available in the processual documents for this project.) I was also interested in hearing opinions about the proposed changes to the global studies requirement, and my second and third interviewees were specifically asked about their thoughts on these proposed changes and how they saw study abroad in relation to them.

The first interview that I conducted occurred relatively early in this project's development, before I was fully aware of the global studies requirement and its ramifications for study abroad. It was also conducted through a set list of questions that was planned out in advance. While I felt this yielded beneficial information, I also felt that relying on these questions kept me from diverging "off-script" and could have been more flexible. For the other two interviews I wanted to be more improvised; while I had an idea of what sorts of things I

wanted to ask, I deliberately did not prepare questions in order to engage in a more natural dialogue with the interviewees.

### *Observations*

I observed two events throughout the course of this research. The first was the fall semester study abroad fair, hosted by the Office of International Studies on October 22. The fair is an important opportunity for outreach to prospective study abroad students (though it is by no means the only outlet) and showcases most of the programs available through the university. My attendance at this event was based on my interest in better understanding how the study abroad office makes itself available to the student body, especially during one of its most public events.

The second event I observed, somewhat removed from the first, was an open forum on the global studies requirement hosted by the University Curriculum Committee on November 11 and 12. (I attended the second forum.) This forum was held to educate interested parties on the proposed changes and to allow debate on the issue. While this event was open to students, it seemed to me that I was the only attendee who wasn't a faculty or administration member. I was also surprised to see that the International Studies Office was not represented, though I believe it was mentioned that they attended the earlier session. This observation was particularly important in that it presented the discourse surrounding the global studies requirement and emphasized the critiques of study abroad as a part of international education. Grievances were aired, and it was made clear (at least to me) that support for study abroad promotion wasn't as clear cut and unilateral as one might initially believe.



### *Texts*

My understanding of the issues surrounding the global studies requirement was also informed by a number of texts, formal and informal, from various university sources. Minutes from previous meetings of the Council on General Education and the Senate Academic Affairs Committee, dating back to last year, provide accounts of early propositions to change the requirement and revealing the processes through which suggestions become university policy. I have also looked at e-mails from ethnic studies and anthropology faculty listservs which discuss the proposed requirement changes. The e-mails that I read were ubiquitous in their opposition to the changes, and these electronic discussions predicated those that took place during the open forum. (Though they were, perhaps, more sardonic when not in a face-to-face setting.)

The sources of data engaged through this research represent part of the discourse surrounding a particular piece of university policy and the spaces through which this discourse propagates. It is by no means comprehensive, but is representative of some the critiques of the study abroad institution that have risen due to the particular circumstances at Illinois State University.

### FINDINGS

Each person interviewed in this study plays a unique role in Illinois State University, and their opinions concerning study abroad are informed by unique contexts coming from their individual experiences. While generalities can be drawn from these accounts, these encounters should be first introduced individually: "snapshots" of a larger portrait, no one encompassing

the whole frame but each offering a unique insight. The summaries of these interviews will be presented in the order that they were conducted.

### *Samantha Potempa*

Samantha Potempa is the coordinator of study abroad in the Office of International Studies and Programs. At the time that this interview was conducted, I was becoming interested in how study abroad programming guided students into becoming study abroad participants; it was a natural conclusion, then, that I reach out to the person in charge of this program. When I first met Samantha, I was immediately surprised by how young she was. While I couldn't say exactly how old she is—a question that would spoil most interviews—I would guess that she couldn't be more than a few years older than myself. But study abroad is a uniquely collegiate experience, specifically tailored for students coming out of high school and ready for the excitement of university life. Who better to reach out to these students than someone who had been in those same shoes (relatively) recently?

As someone who is literally paid by the university to promote study abroad, it was no surprise that Samantha held the study abroad experience in high regard. Having gone on three separate study abroad trips in the course of her educational career, Samantha had an excellent understanding of study abroad from both student and administrative perspectives. When she told me about the common fears and hindrances students face in going abroad, she was also quick to mention ways that office worked to mitigate these concerns. I never asked what she thought the benefits of going abroad were—partly because I had neglected to consider asking, but also because I had thought I had heard these things a thousand times before. In hindsight I

regretted not knowing, and so this would be the first thing I would ask in my following interviews. Generally speaking, however, Samantha was optimistic about the role of the study abroad office in ISU life. With an ever-increasing desire to send students abroad, the office had its work cut out for it.

*Dr. Skibo*

As of this semester, Dr. James Skibo is the chair of the ISU Department of Sociology and Anthropology. He was also the second ISU professor I met before applying to graduate school. Besides his duties as department chair, Dr. Skibo personally advises several archaeology graduate students—my friends and colleagues—and is himself a prominent scholar in the field of ceramic analysis. Despite being a very busy man, Dr. Skibo was taking the time to co-develop a new study abroad program to Burgos, Spain. As someone who had not previously conducted a formal study abroad trip (he is the director of an on-going field school), I was interested in talking to Dr. Skibo about the motivations and planning a professor takes into consideration when creating a study abroad program.

For Dr. Skibo, the best way for a student to engage new perspectives and ways of life is to interact with them face-to-face. (A traditional anthropological perspective, certainly.) He recalled seeing many students coming back from study abroad positively changed and eager to continue their exploration of the world. While most people are afraid of stepping out of their comfort zones and travelling internationally, Dr. Skibo believed that taking that first step into the unknown is enough to make somebody get over those fears. He was inspired to develop a study abroad program after a recent trip to an archaeology conference in Burgos. With

numerous sites of historical and archaeological significance in the city and the surrounding region, a study abroad trip to this region would be valuable to students from multiple disciplines and with varying interests. As a short term (2-week) program, it would also keep costs low for students and help mitigate fears from students and parents that come with longer stays. Besides the program that he is helping to develop, Dr. Skibo has a personal goal as a department chair to increase the number of sociology and anthropology students studying abroad.

While Dr. Skibo sees great benefit in promoting study abroad, he does not believe that changing the global studies education requirement as the best way of doing it. What a student learns while studying abroad can be very different than what would be learned through global studies coursework, and ideally both of these things should be part of a general studies education. Instead, departments should find other ways to accommodate those students interested in studying abroad, and there should be no problem with the coexistence of study abroad and the standing global studies requirement.

*Dr. Pereira*

I first met Dr. Kim Pereira when I attended the forum on the global studies requirement. Of the professors opposed to the changes being proposed, he was among the most outspoken in addressing his issues (and the issues of his colleagues) of what the changes could mean for student education. Dr. Pereira is a theatre professor in the college of fine arts, and formerly served as the director of the university's honors program. Through his work with the honors

program and as a professor, Dr. Pereira is an avid supporter of study abroad despite being a strong critic of changes being made in the name of study abroad promotion.

Dr. Pereira believes that study abroad is one of the most important things a student can do in his or her college career. By interacting with peoples from different cultures and with different perspectives, a person comes to define their own experiences by relating and opposing with others. A stay in a different society can and should be transformative, and study abroad can give this opportunity to students. Ideally, study abroad should be an immersive experience: a long term stay which engages in the daily life and language of the host culture. However, many study abroad programs do not succeed in giving students these experiences. Dr. Pereira is disappointed that many programs house American students with other Americans, conduct coursework primarily in English, and otherwise separate students from the host culture. Moreover, as most students abroad are going to Europe, he questions that all study abroad experiences would offer students the same content they would learn in a global studies course. This is especially true with regards to short-term trips, ostensibly offering the same things that a semester-long course would under the proposed requirement changes. While these study abroad trips may be value in and of themselves, Dr. Pereira believes that this value is not the same as a global studies education.

## CONCLUSIONS

I hesitate to call any of the results of this project "conclusions"; rather, I hope that they lead to new questions about study abroad institutions and their effect on the university. While this research is concerned with a particular policy change at a particular institution, it informs

issues that could be found in other campuses nationwide and begs for further research inquiry into the goals of study abroad in higher education.

Everyone interviewed for this project was highly supportive of study abroad as a general concept. They saw the benefits of international education as personal, exceeding beyond the academic and personal benefits that are typically lauded by student programming. These opinions were formed both by personal life experiences and by their perceptions of students who had studied abroad. However, they also did not see study abroad as an effective substitute to coursework devoted to the study of non-western peoples and ideas. While both global studies and study abroad are important parts of student education, they are not valuable for the same reasons. Moreover, it also clear that not all study abroad programs are created equal. While short term programs have their own advantages, it is questionable that they are afforded the same value as longer term programs of study.

At the heart of this issue is a question of accessibility in study abroad. While it is clear that there is a drive to promote study abroad in the university, it is not so clear whether or not this promotion really equates to more access. The idea that study abroad can and should be a priority for all students in the modern university should be brought into question. And when participation in study abroad falls along clear lines of race and socioeconomic status, as it does at this institution as well as others, we need to ask if study abroad is something that is being made available to all students. It should be ensured that the voices of a diverse university body is not being lost in the rush to send students abroad, and that study abroad does not come at the cost of other important programs.

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