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## THE MENTOR IN YOU:EXPECTED AND RECIEVED STUDY ABROAD PREPARATION

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THE MENTOR IN YOU:  
EXPECTED AND RECIEVED STUDY ABROAD PREPARATION

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**Abstract**

When you think of studying abroad, visions of exotic locations and wild adventures come to mind. However, have you ever thought about the process before going abroad? This study examines the steps and programs offered to a student before going abroad. The research process involved examining existing literature about the study abroad process and what programs are offered at Illinois State University. Two interviews were conducted with students who have already studied abroad and one interview with a student who is about to study abroad. Further investigation included reviewing blogs and examining the data through narrative analysis. The research findings concluded that the mentor needs mentorship and the study abroad program repeats the same information from past events.

**Keyterms**

study abroad, ethnography, mentor, social support, practical support, media support

**Introduction**

There has been a growing interest in studying abroad across the Illinois State University campus. Marketing, creating mentor programs, and the process of establishing the

study abroad experience as a Global Studies requirement are some of the advances the Study Abroad Program is taking to draw students in. With these advances, the Study Abroad Program is trying to provide global awareness to the student population.

The aim of this study is to understand the resources that are provided to students before going abroad. Our research questions for this study are “what support is offered and/or expected from social, professional, and media mentors for the process of studying abroad?” as well as, “are these mentorships helpful in preparing students to study abroad?” With these questions in mind, we applied them to the ISU Study Abroad Program’s recruiting and preparing process. In this paper, we examine the existing literature and ideas we can apply to our University’s program. We then explain the types of ethnographic methods to retrieve our data. These methods include three interviews with students from ISU who have studied or are about to study abroad, along with narrative data analysis similar to Nancy Redfern-Vance. Finally, we conclude with our findings and provide advice to the University on improvements for the Study Abroad Program.

### **Literature Review**

“Study Abroad Choice Process and Outreach at the  
University of Illinois Urbana- Champaign”

Making a choice to study abroad is a big decision for a college student, but there are many different options available to help the student through this process. To help us understand this process we examined the article, “Study Abroad Choice Process and Outreach at the University of Illinois Urbana- Champaign,” written by student Lauren A. Szafranski from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Throughout the paper Szafranski addressed certain aspects that we can use here at Illinois State University. Peer advisors at U of I or Ambassadors at ISU are a very important part of the process when

studying abroad because they can provide information that the Study Abroad advisors do not know. Registered Student Organizations (RSO) are part of the social support process where the students can receive different types of information from the peer advisors or ambassadors because they do not have limitations to follow. Throughout both programs, the Study Abroad Office tries to reach students through Study Abroad Fairs, First Step sessions, social media and tables out on the quad. Other ways the program reaches out to the student population are by flyers and posters implying the types of experiences the student will gain from the study abroad program. The paper provides different ideas on how to approach the study abroad program here at Illinois State University.

“Damp Rooms and Saying ‘Please’:

Mimesis and Alterity in the Host Family Space in Study-Abroad Experiences”

Through this article, Neriko Musha Doerr exposes the ways in which the idea of “host family culture” within study abroad does not match the accurate experience of this living situation. While this program was advocated as a way to gain “global competence” and better understand cultural differences, Doerr argues that the host family culture found ways to accommodate for perceived difference but did not tolerate perceived sameness. These adjustments were made without considering why these behaviors seemed similar or different. Therefore, Doerr states that it is difficult to tell who is imitating whom in this “space between.” In an interview with SG, she discusses her experience with her own host family in Grenada, Spain, as well as attempting to integrate herself into the local community in the context of her Catholicism. By analyzing these interactions using the lens of Doerr’s research, similar patterns are observed in regard to imitation and “understanding” of oneself compared to others. Doerr’s research does not have to be restricted to the host family space

either, and can be utilized for interpreting relationships with clubs, friends, and academic communities.

“Learning Abroad or Just Going Abroad?:

International Education in Opposite Sides of the Border”

In this article, author Gerando Ramirez explains the faults and cultural misrepresentations of the study abroad program. This provides us with a guideline on what to examine within the study abroad office and what type of advice we might want to address when observing the study abroad office. Cultural misrepresentation is the process of showing only the “safest” part of the culture versus the real representation of the culture. This can be addressed by the type of information that is provided to the student during their debriefing process of their study abroad program. Part of the debriefing process includes pre-departure lectures or courses about the culture the student will experience during their study abroad program. Other types of faults can include the marketing aspect of the program by appealing to only a certain group of students and financial abilities.

### **Methodology/ Methods**

The research process pulled from several types of sources. We began by looking into different representatives of the Study Abroad program, as given by the University. Consulted sources include a Vidette Online article on ISU’s StAMP program, a Vidette Online study abroad blog written by Kathleen Plankenhorn, portions of the Study Abroad website, and a StAMP poster. The two latter sources in this list were assessed using a visual analysis.

The most substantial amount of data came from three qualitative student interviews. These interviews were conducted face-to-face, whether through Skype or in person. One interviewee is planning on studying in Ankara, Turkey during the Spring 2015 semester. The other two students have already returned from their semesters abroad. Two of the interviews

were recorded and transcribed by their respective interviewers for further analysis. However, the third interview audio file also yielded extensive notes after the date of the meeting.

After gathering these evidence points, we utilized the narrative analysis method of Nancy Redfern-Vance to contextualize the data in the forum of study abroad mentorship. Redfern-Vance explains the process of how to analyze narrative data with her dissertation on sexual abuse among women veterans. She provides a useful code system and how to apply it to an interview.

### Blogs

The blog that we examined was written by Kathleen Plankenhorn, who studied abroad in Australia (Spring 2013) and wrote a series of blogs for the Vidette Online newspaper after her return. Some of these posts simply detailed her vacation experiences on the continent, but there were also several posts providing some advice on decisions one could make during the pre-departure process. Though this is just a blog, not a specific interaction, there is an implied reader whenever you publish something online, and Plankenhorn's blog could be considered one type of guidance forum. Some of the key phrases that pop up in the articles are "adapt to changes," "challenging," "struggle," "adjustment," "cannot take things for granted," among others that describe a difficulty that comes with the process of studying abroad. The language choices alone point to a feeling that studying abroad is a difficult experience, one that requires a certain amount of advice. These posts each had a similar progression from a story/problem she encountered in Australia to justifying the "struggle" of these problems with the reasoning that it will help you grow more as a person. There was another assumption present that studying abroad would help you learn about (and appreciate) your own culture, rather than appreciating the culture that you are currently observing.

## Data

### Illinois State University Study Abroad Program

To understand the internal workings of study abroad mentor/mentee relationships, we first must acquaint ourselves with the ISU Study Abroad Program as a whole. Their office is one part of the larger Office of International Studies and Programs. Currently, there are four main advisors in the SA Office, including the Assistant Director. The program has recently been promoting itself more and more in an effort to raise the value that students place on studying abroad. On the main website, their mission state reads:

The Study Abroad Office provides Illinois State University students with the opportunity to find a unique and impactful educational experience in a setting far from home. Programs abroad offer first-hand experiences with different countries and cultures in a wide variety of academic disciplines and interests. Students are able to work with an advisor to find the program that best fits their schedule and needs.

This office also facilitates international linkages and collaborations, including student and faculty exchanges, collaborative research opportunities, the development of international training, and other academic outreach activities. Through these endeavours, the Study Abroad Office hopes to strengthen the connections between Illinois State University and our partner institutions abroad. (Study Abroad Office)

In both sections of their mission statement, academics are a clear focus of the program, along with the goal of connecting different programs and students. On the Programs page of the website, ISU's SA Office boasts a total of 1,426 offered programs on every continent besides Antarctica. These programs range from exchange experiences, "direct enrollment" with a partner university, as well as departmental and faculty led trips. To promote these programs and inform students, the SA Office hosts several study abroad fairs, "First Steps" sessions, and pre-departure orientations.

Illinois State's SA Program is also a partner of the Generation Study Abroad Initiative, which has a goal of doubling the amount of students studying abroad by the end of this decade ("About the Initiative"). In partnering with this Initiative, the ISU Office is

actively aligning itself with their assertions that study abroad experiences are infinitely valuable to students and offer authentic cultural experiences.

### Visual Data

#### **University of Limerick Study Abroad Website**

The page on ISU's Study Abroad website for U. of Limerick is separated into several sections: Location, Academics, Program Dates, Prerequisites, Housing & Meals, and Student Life. Three photographs are also present for the Location, Housing & Meals, and Student Life portions. All three of these photos provide either a social representation of the Limerick program or an iconic depiction of the Irish landscape. No pictures are present for the academic section, despite the fact that it is called studying abroad. One interpretation of this information is that the program, despite the name and location (at a university), is not advertised by Illinois State as a specifically academic experience.

#### **StAMP Poster**

One of the visual data sources was a flyer for the Study Abroad Mentor Program (StAMP) at Illinois State. This flyer has been used to advertise for a new RSO that claims to offer mentoring for students about to study abroad. The flyer is in black and white. A grid of 6 pictures is at the bottom of the flyer, and each of these pictures features one or two students who have been abroad standing in front of a tourist attraction (e.g. Abbey Road, the Eiffel Tower, Big Ben, etc.) There is a second logo overlapping this grid, which resembles a passport stamp. In none of the pictures are students depicted as interacting with other international students or becoming involved in their local communities on a personal level. In the group photographs it is difficult to tell if they are all ISU students or local students. The



lack of color also makes the flyer less eye-catching than the other brochures and could deter students from picking up a copy.

### Data in the News

#### **Vidette Online Article--StAMP**

The StAMP program is a new Registered Student Organization at Illinois State University. This program was created in an effort to offer student-to-student advice before departing for the semester abroad. An article in the Vidette's Online newspaper speaks about this program, as well as interviewing the creator and members of the organization. Juliet Denckla, the student creator, states that she began the program because she had received extensive advice from a close friend before she left on her trip. She wanted to provide this experience to other students "to help ease the transition into unfamiliar territory" (Annunzio CITATION). This belief that studying abroad requires an adjustment guide is present in Kathleen Plankenhorn's blog as well.

However, not just any guide will do. In her Vidette interview, Denckla states that "mentors are able to provide mentees with answers to questions that advisors may not be able to help them with" (Annunzio 2014). When previously assessing this news article, we thought that perhaps study abroad alumni (and StAMP mentors) could more accurately prepare students for their trip abroad because they would not have to restrict any information as the University might. However, it is explained in the article that training sessions "[outline] the range of material a mentor should cover with their mentee before they depart" (Annunzio 2014). This range of information is not defined, but it is clear that there is still a restriction on what mentors can and cannot discuss about the various study abroad programs. Along with the interviews, which will be examined further on, it is shown that our original inference is incorrect—these peer mentor/mentee relationships are also kept in check.

Throughout our Anthropology 302 (Ethnography) course, a pattern has presented itself in the topic of validation. This pattern is continued with the StAMP program. Sara McBride, one of the current mentors, states that before her trip she was glad to have “someone to reassure me that the adventure that awaits me is worth all the nerves that come with traveling across the world on my own” (Annunzio 2014). Despite the fact that she had a personal desire to study abroad, she felt it necessary for an outside party to tell her she should have that desire.

### **SAAI Periodical**

In the periodical, “An Urgent Call to Action for Study Abroad Alumni to Help Reduce Our Global Awareness Deficit,” the speaker Matthew Cossolotto is providing a speech to students at a reentry conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. At the beginning of the speech, Cossolotto engages the students by asking questions about the process, the reason, and who influenced them to study abroad. Then he proceeds to tell about his own study abroad experience in Sweden and how it created a path for his own career choice. As the speech continues, Cossolotto contributes information about the organization he created to help provide funding for students to study abroad. This organization is the Study Abroad Alumni International (SAAI), where former study abroad alumni from all over the world, donate money and become an unofficial ambassador for their study abroad program. Cossolotto expresses that these students should use their own study abroad experience to help promote the importance of studying abroad.

### **Findings**

After sorting through our data, we came to three conclusions: mentors also need mentors, mentors restate information given to them regardless of their personal experience,

and some mentor boundaries are understood (unspoken), while some are clearly stated. The first conclusion was pulled from our data on the organizations created to help students before their study abroad experience. The second and third conclusions originated from the First Steps sessions, other study abroad related events, our interviews with the students, and presentations from study abroad alumni.

When comparing the two organizations StAMP and SAAI, we noticed many similarities. Both organizations provide mentors who are alumni from study abroad programs. Cossolotto's alumni are people from all over the world and Denckla's alumni are specifically related to the Illinois State Study Abroad program. However, the main resemblance between these organizations is in the creation process. Both Juliet Denckla and Matthew Cossolotto explain that they would not have started up their respective programs without experiencing some sort of mentoring from a more "authoritative" party. Denckla states in the StAMP Vidette article that she "gained so much and felt so comfortable and prepared having Ashley as sort of a mentor, so I decided to start StAMP" (Annunzio 2014). Denckla does not say that she consulted with her old mentor directly about the formation of the StAMP program. However, it is made clear that the inspiration for the program would not have materialized without the original mentoring sessions. Denckla required this experience in order to believe that the program could be a valuable one. Cossolotto, on the other hand, directly searched for someone to tell him that constructing the SAAI program was a good idea:

What about forming an international association of study abroad alumni? It sounded so obvious.

But as far as I knew such an organization did not exist. I thought to myself... What better advocates for the study abroad experience than alumni of these programs?

I talked about this idea with other members of the task force and received a good deal of positive feedback. The day the task force released its report, I phoned former Senator Paul Simon... who had served as an honorary co-char of the task force. I wanted to see what Senator Simon thought about this idea of forming a study abroad

alumni organization. Not just for U.S. alumni ... but for study abroad alumni worldwide. (Cossolotto 2009)

Despite the fact that Cossolotto believed that this idea was an “obvious” one, he still felt required to consult with others that have more professional authority. These conferences could easily be described as mentoring sessions and were only used to acquire validation for the program. The experiences of Denckla and Cossolotto establish the concept of a mentor needing another mentor in the decision-making process.

In the case of the StAMP and SAAI programs, the belief that mentors need mentoring is perpetuated by the respective Presidents themselves. On the other hand, we also discovered instances where this additional level of mentoring is enforced by a higher authority. The Vidette Online article about the StAMP program explains that

All mentors associated with StAMP are carefully trained on how to best assist their mentees. The mandatory training session outlines the range of material a mentor should cover with their mentee before they depart. Training also includes tips on ways to build a relationship with your mentee. (Annunzio 2014)

The mentoring that takes place here for students planning on studying abroad is layered and complex. It is not only the StAMP mentor that gives advice—these same mentors also “need” training and it is assumed that they cannot be good mentors on their own. Just as they provide support for their mentee, these students also receive what is considered support from their RSO leaders.

A similar process takes place before the pre-departure orientation sessions. In an interview with Suzanne Goodman, who is a senior Spanish Education major and studied in Grenada, Spain, she spoke a bit about the orientation session she led after returning to ISU. On the topic of mentor preparation, she states, “I guess maybe you had to be there a little bit early and then they talked to you about what things to maybe include in your presentation and some things... [pause] to maybe leave out. Yeah, that’s like the only prep we had for it”

(Suzanne Goodman 2014). Later on, interviewer Miner asks SG what these “off limits” topics were:

But then I—yeah, they just very much discouraged talking about any, uh... any times when you were like, going out or you, you know, weren't ahhhh [ph] 100% sober, or, you know, just like, yeah, just basically the party scene, to leave that out. [pause] [...]  
So, it's a little bit different yeah, in... like, a cultural aspect too, because like I think that we did talk about [pause] like the bar scene a little bit, but not in the sense of like, 'Oh, man it's awesome! Drinks are only two Euros! and you can totally—' you know, not like that. They talked about it more like, 'Yeah, it's actually really a social thing, and you like go out with your friends and eat and drink,' and... you know, you just spend the whole night talking, or dancing, or there's karaoke bars, or you know, that kind of thing we did include, but... Yeah, they just discouraged us, mostly, I think from, like, sharing any party stories or anything, which wasn't a problem for me, so. [laughs] (Suzanne Goodman 2014)

Though SG states earlier in the interview that partying and drinking is often a large part of the culture of studying abroad—especially with the American students—the SA Office heavily discourages this public description of the “study abroad experience.” Both the StAMP leaders and the SA Office have determined that their student mentors require their own mentoring on what is and is not appropriate to talk about, regardless of what they actually witnessed and experienced.

First Steps, the Study Abroad Fair, and the Pre-Departure Orientation are areas where the student can retrieve information on what steps to take to go abroad and hear other students' experiences. In these spaces, the information is repetitive on what to expect when in another country. Some of this information involves practical advice and the little weekend getaways you can take while you are abroad. None of these sessions go into detail of the types of cultural shock experiences you will run into in your specific country. Rather, they provide practical information and “fun stuff” (Fiona Smith 2014). The Study Abroad Fair only provides the students with information on the different types of programs available at Illinois State University. Beyond this fact, there is a cycle of repeated information between several generations of SA mentors and the current SA students.

Interviewee SG is one of the students who has received both social and official mentoring (pre-study abroad), as well as provided these types of support after her return to Illinois State University. In speaking with her, it became clear that there is a large gap between the information that is given to students about to travel abroad and the experiences of previous study abroad students, and this gap is perpetuated by the mentors themselves. When SG attended the SA Office's pre-departure orientation, she remembers

them talking about like, some of those cultural differences like, with the hair and, the dress, and [long pause]—trying to think of other cultural differences they talked about. Practical things, like when you go to the ATM take out a lot of money because those charges are expensive, so like, get out a lot of money and like, budget it through the month or whatever. Things like that. (Suzanne Goodman 2014)

SG then goes on to say that the leader of their orientation talked extensively about shopping sales, specifically with the sale price of shoes (Suzanne Goodman 2014). In the middle of this explanation, SG comments on the strangeness of this topic focus, but quickly retracts this commentary: "So it was actually like good advice, but I just remember thinking that was so funny because she was like... talking about how many shoes she bought, but... Yeah, it was good, to buy them while they're on sale" (Suzanne Goodman 2014). So far, there is very little information being shared about significant cultural differences or how to best become involved in the local community that students will be living in. This pattern is shown in the interview with Fiona Smith as well. She draws a distinction between the practical information offered by the professional Turkey program presenter and the "fun stuff" that is shared by the girl who studied there previously; however, these two sides of the story still do not cover in-depth information about the people and culture of Ankara (Fiona Smith 2014).

While SG was living in Grenada, she realized that there is a part of studying abroad that no one spoke about in her mentoring sessions before she left: the party scene. Though she did not take part in most of this nightlife experience, she does make it clear that many of

the American students “stuck together and they would go out to the clubs and party and get drunk and that was like uh... [long pause] not why I was there” (Suzanne Goodman 2014). She makes an effort to verbally separate herself from this group, but still communicates that this scene was a large part of the experience of studying abroad, and it did make a distinct impression on her even over a year later.

Despite the focus that SG gives to this observation, she does not share this information with anyone else who is planning on studying in Grenada. When she leads her own pre-departure orientation for future SA students, she is told by the SA Office not to share any of this information. Even when she mentors a couple of girls planning on going to Grenada on her own time, she ends up sharing either practical information or information on how to get involved with people that practice Catholicism in the way that they already do. In the cycle from pre-departure, to current SA student, to the returning student, the cycle of information is repeated and does not change much according to personal experiences.

The unspoken and clearly stated information is the same on both levels of official and personal mentoring. Even though study abroad alumni are told by the Study Abroad Program what they are allowed to say to students during the Pre-Departure Orientation, the restriction of information is carried over into their personal conversations with friends and family. The unspoken material such as drinking and partying is never stated, yet people know it happens. When in an official setting, the mentor is told not to talk about the off-limits material, but when in a personal setting without such authority the mentor still does not reveal this material. This process almost relates to the phrase “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas” but instead of Vegas, the setting is study abroad. This observation is pulled from Miner’s interview with SG, because SG never explains this side of studying abroad to her friends. In fact, even when speaking with Miner, she seemed uncomfortable with the topic: “I guess I’m trying really hard to like, walk around something that I think is sort of unavoidable, so, I will

try my best not to generalize, but I think that a lot of the other American students that were there, in Grenada... were there for different reasons than I was..." (Suzanne Goodman 2014). We need to break down these barriers because it can be important information for someone else who will study abroad in the future. The reason why study abroad puts limitations on the information is to keep an academic face of the university to the public.

### **Advice**

Rather than providing some sort of concrete conclusion, we would prefer to use our findings towards developing a more effective and accurate Study Abroad Program on Illinois State University's campus. In reviewing our findings, we discovered areas where the Study Abroad program is lacking. These areas involve the process before and after a study abroad experience. First, we believe the department should require students to attend lectures about culture shock and the formalities that should be taken. Next, when study abroad alumni give presentations about their own experiences, they should give more information than they currently provide. Some of this information is about the fears they experienced before, during, and after their study abroad trip and how they overcame them. These fears should be noted, because they are one of the main reasons why students do not study abroad. Since the student will be in another country, the Study Abroad Office should push the student to fully interact with the culture they are living in and be more responsible for their cultural integration.

When coming back to the States, SA should provide lectures on reverse culture shock and reintegration back into the United States. From our interviews with study abroad alumni, the main culture shock experience was not going into a new culture, but returning back to their native culture. Some said it took them a month or two to readjust back into their own community. Adjustments included emotional outbreaks. The SA should create a student



support group for however long it takes for them to feel comfortable back at their home university.

We also have advice for the mentors of the StAMP and ambassadors of the study abroad program. Instead of telling the student about what to bring or places to go, explain what were the cultural differences. These cultural differences are not the obvious ones but the hidden ones. The hidden cultural differences can consist of religion and traditional practices. Other hidden cultural differences can be simpler, such as how they wash their clothes or perceive nudity. We know in many cultures drinking is involved, but the reasons for drinking in their culture can be totally different. By explaining these differences, the student can have an easier transition process into the country.

Between our findings and advice, we believe the Study Abroad Program will be able to improve the before and after process of studying abroad. By strengthening these processes, the Study Abroad Program can gain more students to go abroad. Also students can be prepared for the cultural shock there and here.

Due to our time constraint we were not able to go as in-depth as we would have liked with this research. Other areas where we could have examined more are the mentors themselves. Instead of just talking to students who went abroad or about to go abroad, we could have asked questions to the mentors to see how they believe they are communicating the information. This could have brought up more evidence on how information is presented to the student and what mentors believe they are providing. We could have taken it further by comparing and contrasting the StAMP mentors to the Study Abroad Program's ambassadors. The comparison would have probably addressed more situations or problems on what the student is not receiving from the staff they put their trust in.

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