

The Importance of Identifying Learning Outcomes Achieved by Graduate Students Who  
Participate in Graduate Short-term Study Abroad Programs – Policy Brief for Awesome  
University’s Board of Directors and Administrators

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Since the year 2000 and in response to globalization, the U.S. government and higher education institutions have pressed for more internationalization of campuses (Lincoln Commission, 2005; Stroud, 2010). As Cabrera and Unruh (2012) stated in their book *Being Global: How to Think, Act, and Lead in a Transformed World*, “... it is clear how much more connected, interdependent, and multidirectional our global world is today than at any time in the past” (p. 2). Our communities expect that higher education institutions are taking steps necessary to prepare graduating students for the “...inclusive, multidirectional, interlinked, and hugely complex” (Cabrera & Unruh, 2012, p. 2) global workforce. However, issues still need to be addressed in order for campuses to be successful at the internationalization of campuses – the process of integrating international dimension into institutions (Ward, 2013) – and preparing students for a globalized world.

In *The Landscape of International Experiences: 2014 Research Report*, the Graduate Learning Experiences and Outcomes (GLEO) project team stated that “As the world becomes an increasingly interconnected global community, it is essential that today’s graduate students develop international perspectives and the ability to work with others in diverse settings” (GLEO, 2014). Institutions recognize that short-term study abroad programs – less than eight weeks long – can be significant tools for developing students’ global views and abilities (Dwyer, 2004), but a scant amount of research on the learning graduate students achieve as a result of study abroad programs exists today (GLEO, 2014).

Many institutions intend for non-traditional groups, such as graduate students, to participate in short-term study abroad programs, as graduate students are typically older, work full-time, and/or have spouses and children to consider as part of the decision-making process (Fischer & Zigmond, 1998; GLEO, 2013; Lei & Chuang, 2010; Polson, 2003; Sachau, Brasher, & Fee, 2009). Reasons graduate students elect to study abroad include:

- Improving global competency skills – related to historical and cultural knowledge of an area, language, or people and the ability to use that knowledge to better understand the world – the same skills that future employers desire (Kavas, 2013; Ghose, 2010; Zhang, 2011)
- Conducting individual research (GLEO, 2014)
- Increasing personal development and community engagement (GLEO, 2014)
- Developing career skills such as leadership and professional [sometimes discipline-specific] development (GLEO, 2014)
- Increasing cultural awareness, which often extends beyond the students’ time abroad (Chickering & Braskamp, 2009)

During the 2011-2012 year, 2.6 percent more U.S. higher education students participated in short-term study abroad programs than during the 2007-2008 year (IIE, 2009; IIE, 2013). The growth in short-term study abroad programs might lead the higher education community to believe such efforts were impactful on graduate students studying abroad but that is not so.

- Despite the increase in short-term study abroad programs, only 14 percent of the nearly 283,000 U.S. students who studied abroad 2010-2011 were graduate students (IIE, 2013)

- Research on what graduate students learn from studying abroad, methods for assessing that new knowledge, or how students incorporate the learning into their degree programs and personal lives is still limited

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Institutions will have to conduct more research to understand graduate-level experiences and outcomes necessary to develop programs that graduate students will not only want to participate in, but from which the students will also gain demonstrable, measurable, personal and/or professional benefits. Recommendations for determining what graduate students learn from studying abroad, methods for assessing the new knowledge, and methods for finding out how students incorporate the learning into their degree programs and personal lives follow:

- Faculty trip leaders should incorporate into syllabi class presentations that have family, friends, and colleagues as audiences. Examples include scheduling a capstone assignment to be presented to a local panel of experts in the discipline or arranging for a friends/family course presentation day where class pairs or groups record or conduct live video call presentations on what they learned during the trip. For smaller groups of 10-15 students, these might be done in the hotel lobbies or restaurants where the groups are already staying at no extra expense.
- Researchers can study how to deepen learning within the experiences (GLEO, 2014) by requiring reflection journals of all participating students. Travel program leaders can include starter questions related to prior travel experiences, cultural awareness, and career goals as part of pre-departure materials. This will require faculty review the journals periodically during the trip, midway through the course during a guest lecturer or on a longer train or bus ride to a destination. Upon return to campuses, campuses could schedule a dedicated “Reading Day” for study abroad faculty to spend a morning or afternoon reading journals at the same time while snacks and coffee are provided.
- Conduct more research on graduate students’ post-abroad experiences to determine the learning achieved during the course after they have had time for reflection on the experiences. Incorporate graduate-level poster presentation sessions into study abroad information events on campuses for students who have returned from a short-term study abroad and open the sessions to faculty, staff, and graduate students who will study abroad in the future.
- Develop a methodology for the study and assessment of relevant outcomes associated with short-term faculty-led study abroad experiences for graduate students (GLEO, 2014); institutions can begin by focusing on one country or region and having graduate students develop their own assessments as a starting point. Over the course of several years faculty can revisit and refine the methods and results used as the faculty plan future trips.

## CONCLUSION

Despite their growing popularity, short-term study abroad program managers and educators still lack information on how to design and implement such programs (Sachau et. al, 2009). Institutions will have to focus on outcomes tailored toward graduate students to make short-term study abroad programs more appealing and for the students to feel such programs are worthwhile as part of their educational programs.

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