

Implementation of a Mandatory Semester Abroad

Madison Meszaros

College of Integrative Sciences and Arts, Arizona State University

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Professor Tara Cook

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To: U.S. Department of Education
Cc: Nationwide College Board of Directors
From: Madison Meszaros, ASU Student *MM*
Subject: Mandatory Semester Abroad

Introduction

The purpose of this memo is to persuade the U.S. Department of Education into enforcing a mandatory semester abroad for all current and future college students in the United States of America. This semester long excursion will give the young adults of America the opportunity to become a part of a culture unlike their own which in turn will allow them to grow as individuals and gain knowledge that will better equip them on their lifelong journey.

The current college system does not have a requirement in place for a semester abroad, instead it offers students the option of it, that is if the college the student is enrolled at even has a department for such a thing. This plan will impose an updated list of graduation requirements for enrolled students which will include a semester abroad as a requirement. Once this plan has been implemented it will account for all current students enrolled in a university or college as well as effecting future students.

Description

The concept of studying abroad is not a new topic for universities and their students alike. It gives students the ability to pursue a different form of education in a country separate from their own. Studying abroad bestows knowledge unto students that cannot be taught through class, only experienced by being engulfed in the culture around them. While studying abroad students are taught the language of the country they are in through instructors and real-life scenarios. A semester abroad gives students a brand-new perspective on the world all the while earning credits that will push them towards graduation with more knowledge than if they were to have sat in a classroom.

Young adults have become co-dependent on what they deem to be comfortable for themselves and it is causing a nationwide stunt in the mental growth of American youth. A solution for this is still push these students out of their comfort zone and into a world unfamiliar to their own. Doing so encourages them to use critical thinking skills as well as developing their intercultural communication skills that will help them in their careers post-graduation.

College students have the option to study abroad by applying through their college portal with an unknown possibility of whether they will be accepted or not. This makes the process of studying abroad out of the students control and leaves them with more questions than answers. The implementation of a mandatory semester abroad will give the control back to the students, ensuring them a place abroad along with their peers.

Audience

This proposal is directed at the U.S. Department of Education in addition to all College Board of Directors in the United States. U.S. Department of Education (ED) is a branch of the government that ensures equal access to education for all. They are responsible for providing student loans, grants, and enacting laws unto the education system that must be abided by at both state and local levels. The ED would have the power to implement this proposal into law which will make it mandatory for all college students to spend a semester abroad.

The College Board of Directors encompass a group of trustees that have the responsibility of reviewing academic policies and ensuring that the college students are abiding by them. Each university and college have their own group of directors, but each group has similar responsibilities, such as enforcing their students to take on a semester abroad. They also have financial responsibilities over the university and will place the funds the students provide unto their semester abroad.

Opposition

The U.S. Department of Education and the College Board of Directors may view proposal as a waste of resources, however, the money put in by the student for their semester can be allotted towards their semester abroad. The country that students choose to study abroad at can range in price, so if a student cannot allot a large sum of money, then they have the option of studying abroad in a less expensive country versus one that requires more financial help. The money the student would have paid for their semester tuition at the college would just go towards their semester abroad, meaning there would be no increase in cost unless the student chooses a country that is clearly outside the tuition price.

There may also be opposition from individuals who are unable to spend a semester abroad due to underlying medical conditions. With every mandatory rule there will always be exceptions, so accommodations will be provided for students who cannot join their peers on trips. One form of accommodation includes a mandatory course that gives the student some insight into the culture of the country they would have liked to visit. This will not give the same level of experience as someone who lived in the country and experienced their culture firsthand, but it will provide them a bit of understanding as if they did spend time there.

Research

Research will need to be done to further emphasize the importance of a semester abroad for college age students. There are a few sources that can be used such a journal article in the ASU database that compare individuals who spent time abroad versus those who did not and what their outcome on life looked like post-graduation. Other important research would include levels of co-dependency in young adults and how they were affected when put in a situation unfamiliar to their own. It will also be interesting to see how successful the people who spent a semester abroad became after graduation compared to those who had never left their area of comfort.

In addition to that research in journal articles, there is also real-life sources who can be spoken to on their experiences, what they were taught abroad and how whether what they experienced can be taught in a class setting. Books are another great source for researching the benefits of studying abroad as well as additional studies that can be performed to evaluate the advantages

that have come out on students spending a semester abroad. Finances can also be investigated to compare costs of spending a semester in a particular country versus another and if tuition can be put into that area.

Conclusion

The U.S. Department of Education is responsible for fair and equal access to the education of American youth which includes college students. College students are young adults just entering the world and need to further enhance their communication and problem-solving skills which can be done exceptionally well through studying abroad. A semester abroad will bestow unto the young adults of America better skills to make them a more well-rounded and successful adult in their life and career post-graduation. The skills they will learn is such that cannot be taught in a classroom, only experienced firsthand when surround by a different culture than what they are familiar and comfortable in. Young adults in the world today are unable to see the world through a brand-new perspective which is hindering their growth and is causing America to fall behind their fellow first world countries. Through research and studies, it is shown that spending a few months learning in another country can give these individuals a more knowledgeable understanding of the world. Studying abroad is not about escapism or a vacation away from home, it is about discovering a culture unlike your own, seeing things from their perspective, living day to day like them, and with that you will learn new skills that will push you forward in life.

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to encourage the U.S. Department of Education and Universities Board of Directors to come together to implement a mandatory semester abroad for all incoming university students moving forward. We believe this is the best course of action to ensure the future adults of America are cultured, well-rounded individuals with the necessary global skills to lead our nation into a brighter future. This report is a summary of our research findings that will serve to persuade the U.S. Department of Education (DE) and all other interested parties into implementing this mandatory study abroad program. The following is a list of important highlights that will be addressed further in this report.

- Today's youth, especially with the effects of the pandemic (COVID-19), are struggling in certain skill sets such as communication, teamwork, leadership, maturity, etc. at an increasingly higher rate than previous recorded generations. The digital age has lent a hand to this phenomenon and has aided recent generations into being less social causing a detrimental effect on their psyche. This weakened psyche is affecting their ability to communicate in an effective manner with peers as well as superiors, adjust to sudden changes in their environment, and have a level of maturity that correlate to their age. These issues are causing a life-long effect on their self-esteem which will only worsen over time.
- Evidence has shown that those who spend a semester abroad have benefitted greatly and have shown improvement in the previously addressed skill sets that can be utilized in both their personal life and their career. Additional benefits of found from studying abroad include:
 - a. Fluency in a second language/Improved language skill
 - b. Broadening your network/Discover more career opportunities
 - c. Experience new perspectives on life and cultures
 - d. Increased confidence
 - e. Gain the skills necessary to impress employers
- The development of skill sets such as communication, cross-cultural awareness, maturity, and confidence in individuals who did not have the opportunity to spend a semester abroad lacked compared to those who did have the ability to spend time outside their home country. Being completely immersed in another culture outside their own comfort zone was shown to increase these skills that the other group of individuals were unable to compare to at all.
- Interviewing individuals who spent time abroad while in a study program or in their own time each told similar stories of how they would have been unable to develop these skills while staying in the comfort of their dorm/home. The skills developed while abroad cannot be taught in a classroom but can only be experienced firsthand through immersion.
- More often than not those who spent a semester abroad had a high success rate in the same career path as those who did not spend time abroad. This had to do with their ability to easily adapt to changes in environment which allowed them to be more versatile in the workplace and adjust to various management styles in a similar way to the different teaching styles they experienced during their time abroad. They also had a broadened network and more international connections post-graduation from their studies that pushed them farther in their careers than their counterparts.

- The recommendation for implanting this program would be convert the funds that would have gone to the student's traditional semester into funds for their semester abroad. The amount allocated would correspond to a country of similar expense. The student's choice to go to a different country would be dependent on additional expenses on top of their original tuition or a subtraction of it.

Implementing a Mandatory Semester Abroad

Introduction

When the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic hit our country hard in 2020 there was no one who could predict the effects it would have on our nation and the people within it. One of the demographics hit the hardest was our youth who struggled to return back to normality after two years of being in semi-isolation. It was not until after the fact that we saw how effected this group was when they had difficulties communicating with peers and their superiors. The lack of confidence in themselves was an eerie sight to see and a wake call for our leadership. The purpose of this report is to encourage the U.S. Department of Education and any additional, interested parties into implementing a mandatory study abroad program for all incoming university/college students moving forward.

The current college system does not have a requirement in place for a semester abroad, instead it offers students the option of it, that is if the college the student is enrolled at even has a department for such a thing. This plan will impose an updated list of graduation requirements for enrolled students which will include a semester abroad as a requirement. Once this plan has been implemented it will account for all current students enrolled in a university or college as well as effecting future students.

After analyzing where America's youths' psyche is currently in today's digital age, we argue that a mandatory semester abroad will help correct the problem that they face in regard to being self-reliant and independent. We believe that removing this generations from their comfort zone will help alleviate their lack of confidence and will start developing the necessary skill sets to help them thrive in todays' world. We recommend that the U.S. Department of Education as well as all College Board of Directors take this report into consideration when revamping college graduation requirements. We believe that alternating a traditional semester into one abroad will solve this crisis happening to our youth in the States.

This report includes four sections: a) our methodology, b) the results of our research, c) a discussion of these results, and d) our recommendation

Methodology

To understand why implementing a semester abroad is the necessary course of action, we developed a 5- part research plan that proves our argument.

Part 1: Evaluate the current effects of youth's psyche post- Covid

Part 2: Gather information on the benefits of a semester abroad

Part 3: Compare and Contrast the skill sets of both groups

Part 4: Interview individuals who studied abroad and who did not

Part 5: Compare and Contrast the success rates of both groups

Part 1: Evaluate Current Youth's Psyche

When looking into the current state of our youth's self-esteem, it seemed to be that they lacked in many skill sets which in turn lowered their confidence affecting their day-to-day life. We have determined that the following skill sets have been affected the most and could be helped through a study abroad program:

Communication: There is a clear struggle in their ability to communicate effectively with their peers and superiors which will negatively affect them in their career if this skill set cannot be improved. This category also includes intercultural communication as this skill is becoming increasingly necessary as the world around becomes increasingly diverse.

Adaptability/Flexibility: They need to have the ability to adapt to changes in their environment and be flexible with it as well. Today, this current group is stubborn in their ways and have a difficult time stepping outside their comfort zone or dealing with change in general.

Independence/Total Self-awareness: The need to be independent is crucial but is still an issue in today's youth who are reliant on their mobile phones and their close-knit community. They need to be on their own and have self-awareness. This self-awareness includes two subcategories:

1. Internal self-awareness – knowing ourselves and the impact we have on others
2. External self-awareness – understanding other people's views back onto us

We will go into more detail on these subcategories on their need for them in the discussion.



Figure 1

Problem solving/sense of responsibility: They have shown a clear lack in the ability to problem solve which is defined by Quality Resources as “the act of defining a problem; determining the cause of the problem; identifying, prioritizing, and selecting alternatives for a solution; and implementing a solution,” (Quality Resources, 2022). This category also includes their lack of responsibility or feeling the need to accomplish what they set out to do. There is a lack of follow through.

Part 2: Gather Information on the Benefits

We needed to find the evidence of the benefits of a semester abroad, so that it can be used to support our argument of implementing the mandatory semester overseas. For us to find this data we had to turn to ASU Library database (EBSCOhost) as well as find the evidence through the use of the internet, google, by searching key phrases such as: ‘benefits’ + ‘semester abroad’. Any articles on this topic were then evaluated for key information that could be argued in our favor.

The information we gathered allowed us to fully comprehend the extensiveness of the benefits a semester abroad truly bestows onto the students. It was clear to see that spending a semester abroad had far more benefits that outweighed any cons that the U.S. Department of Education or any College Board of Directors may have against the implementation.

Part 3: Compare and Contrast Skill Set

This part of the research plan took a deep dive into journal articles and other studies that looked into the long-term impacts of being a part of an abroad program. A study done by Larsen, DeGraaf, Ditta, and Slagter in 2013 called “The Long-term Personal and Professional Impacts of Participating in a Study Abroad Program,” which involved looking into certain aspects of life after a semester abroad and comparing and contrasting the two groups on what percentage of them were involved or took part in these activities. A few categories that they compared were both groups percentage of local civic engagement, international civil engagement, and percentage of both groups increased skill sets.

The data pulled from this study further proves the need for a mandatory semester abroad for all university students moving forward. The data found will be shown in more depth in the results section of this research report as well as visual aids/figures.

Part 4: Interviewing

During this research project, I decided that in order for the report to have the affect I want it to have on the U.S. Department of Education, I needed to gather firsthand testimonies from individuals who spent time abroad. This led me to Leif Swenson, who spent a semester abroad while in college. He sat down with me for an interview and further elaborated on his time abroad, what skill sets he gained, and the life lessons he learned. One of the biggest parts I took away from his testimony that I hope the U.S. Department of Education acknowledges as well is his acknowledgement that he the skills he has today would have not been as developed as they are now without the time he spent abroad. Mr. Swenson stated, “the time spent abroad gave me the opportunity to know who I am and allowed myself to understand the world around me from a new perspective without the conformity of a classroom setting.” (L. Swenson, personal communication, April 13, 2022).

Part 5: Career Success Rates/Improvements

There are many studies that have been done that acknowledge that a study abroad has either helped students break into their career path or helped them gain the skills necessary for their career choice. The “Erasmus Student Network’s Impact Study” collected data from students who spent a semester abroad and the percent impact it has on employability. Three main parts of the study showed that:

- a higher percentage of students who spent a semester abroad had higher employability skills after their stay.
- employers considered individuals that study abroad more employable than those who did not, because they had the higher level of skill sets that the latter group did not have from studying in a traditional setting.
- that students who had study abroad had a lower percentage of being unemployed five years post-graduation than those who were not a part of a study abroad program.

The percentage data of this study will be shown in more detail in the results section of this research report with figures/graphs as visual aids.

Results

This section of the study will showcase evidence of individuals who felt they lacked in specific skill sets and how spending time abroad helped improve these qualities, allowing them to further develop themselves into who they are today. There is currently no policy that enforces study abroad or denies it. These results will prove to listening parties that creating this policy is essential to establishing better future leaders for our country.

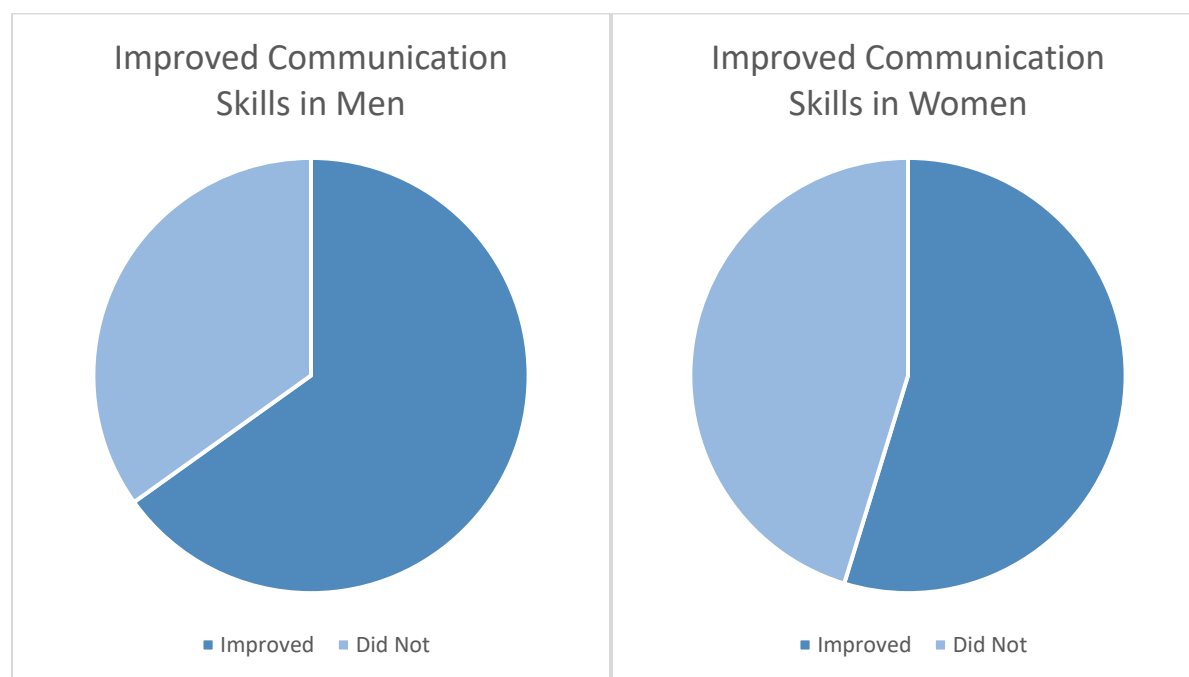
Skills Learned

Communication

Studying abroad takes a lot of courage, however, it is the skills learned from this experience that changes a person's whole perspective of the world and directory in life. Some skills that individuals struggled with prior to their time abroad was their ability to communicate effectively with people from different backgrounds, which acts as a roadblock in their ability to becoming someone in a leadership position. Durant (2018), a communication major, states that

“Studying abroad expands your global outlook of people, their language, and their culture. The experience gives you practice in understanding people from completely different languages and cultural backgrounds. It surrounds you with people who might communicate differently, which in turn makes you a better communicator,” (Durant, 2018).

A study done in 2013 by Larsen et. all found that more than half of the individuals who studied abroad felt that the experience had improved their social/communication skills in their life post-graduation.



This study found that a little more than half their participants saw an increase in their social skills as well as their communication skills which is far less than what the impact study done through

Erasmus saw in their findings. Erasmus Impact Study (2013) found that more than ninety percent of their students saw an increase in their ability to communicate effectively. This ability was also included in a few other soft skills that were picked up by students while studying abroad. (ESN,2013).

Adaptability/Flexibility

When pushed outside your comfort zone you have no choice but to adapt to your new environment in order to survive. Learning to become adaptable is a skill learnt while traveling abroad that can be utilized on a smaller scale in your day-to-day life or in your professional life. To be adaptable and flexible means “you are able or willing to change in order to suit different conditions. Being flexible means, you can do this easily,” (The University of Sheffield Career Service, 2022). These skills are looked for by employers because they see you have the ability to jump from task to tasks, utilize new methods, and are open to learning new techniques in an ever-changing world.

The ability to be adaptable and flexible give you these following benefits in the workplace as well as your personal life:

- To be able to hold a leadership position who is confronted with problems and is able to create changes that solve these issues
- You become resilient. When faced with setbacks you are able to bounce back.
- Being adaptable is a sought-after skill by employers and one poll done by ERMA found that “91% of HR experts believe that the major criteria for recruitment will be the ability of a candidate to adapt,” (Risk Management Article, 2022).

One student, Stephanie Sadler, who became an ambassador for CU Boulder after her trip to Florence, found that being adaptable was a skill she needed to learn fast. In fact, she found that it was one of three vital advantages that students who studied abroad were able to learn that student’s who did not study abroad still struggle with today.

After dealing with many setbacks on her trip such as: pickpocketing, language barriers, missing trains, etc., she learned that in order to survive she had to adapt. Sadler went on to say that “learning this adaptability factor has allowed me to grow in my personal and professional endeavors,” (Sadler, 2015).



Figure 2: Sadler and companions adapting to pickpocketing in Florence

Independence/Total Awareness

To be completely aware of oneself is a feat in it of itself, but it is a necessary concept to have because of the benefits that come along with it such as having a higher self-esteem, coping with changes, knowing the effect you have on others, and understanding how others view themselves and the world around them differently from yourself. There are two kinds of self-awareness that can be achieved through studying abroad:

1. **Internal self-awareness:** this is how we view ourselves from the inside out, which ranges from our values to why we behave in certain environments as well as how our actions impact those around us. Eurich, from the Harvard Business Review, found that “internal self-awareness is associated with higher job and relationship satisfaction,” (Eurich, 2018).
2. **External self-awareness:** this is how other people view us based on our internal self-awareness.

It is important for the youths of our country to expand their world view and get outside their comfort zone. When they are put in these situations, they become more aware of their actions and why they are who are as a person. Knowing this about oneself is the first step to be able to improve upon yourself. This can only be done while in a place where they can be completely dependent on themselves and no one else around them. Being able to accomplish this is what will help boost this next-generations confidence and self-esteem that has been currently lacking in recent years.

Some countries force you to have to survive without your cell phone, leading to full immersion in the culture around. New perspectives are formed and who you are as a person may change forever, “There is not one person who has studied abroad that doesn’t return changed by the experience,” (Frank, 2020). The type of people we want leading our country in the future are individuals who are worldly and have a profound respect for cultures unlike their own. These articles have shown that people prior to studying abroad are much more close-minded and struggle to see views from different perspectives compared to after their full immersion into the culture unlike their own.

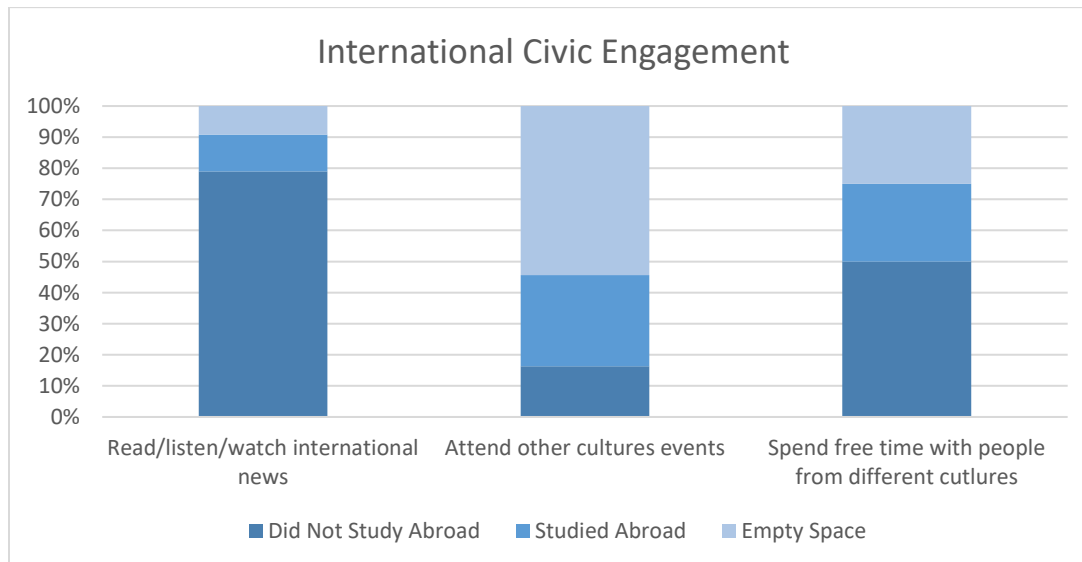
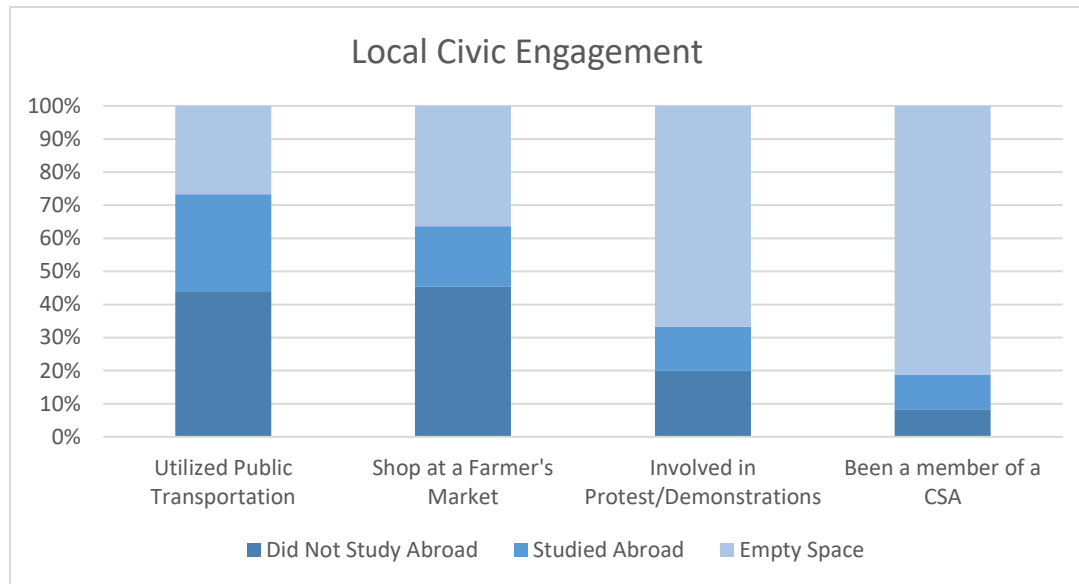
This one of the many benefits of studying abroad because “by immersing yourself in another culture, you develop valuable life skills needed for personal growth, including independence and adaptability. These skills can give you an added boost of confidence in your personal and professional life,” (Shulsinger, 2017). Being completely aware allows the student to come back with an understanding of who they are and what they want to do with the rest of their lives. Too many people remain in their comfort zone and are never able to achieve their full potential because they were unable to become truly independent and self-reliant.

How do the two groups compare?

As stated previously, a study was done in 2013 by Larsen et al that surveyed participants who studied abroad versus those who did not study abroad in certain aspects of their life post-graduation. There quite a few interesting percent differences between the two groups in regard to their local and international civic engagement.

Based on the two graphs below, the study found that individuals who spent time abroad had a higher percent chance of local and international civic engagement in various categories. A few of the categories had a small percent difference, but the category for “utilizing public transportation” showed a larger difference. The group the studied abroad is more interested in utilizing public transportation, which in turn is a main factor in preventing pollution in our earth’s air.

These are the two graphs on local and international civic engagement:



The two graphs above indicate that those who spent time abroad were more open to surrounding themselves with people who are a part of a different culture than their own. Being open-minded is an extremely important quality to have in life as it not only broadens your network because you are opening yourself up to other sides of life, but you also become more culturally aware. Cultural awareness allows us to “communicate with people more effectively, beyond words and grammar, by understanding their culture,” (Maina D., 2021).

Interview

I had the opportunity to interview someone who participated in a study abroad program with their university and give their testimony on their experience. Leif Swenson spent a summer abroad in London in 2016, while majoring in Computer Science. He was hired within a year out

of graduation as a software developer and is now succeeding in his choice of career. The following is his testimony of his experience and how it changed him:

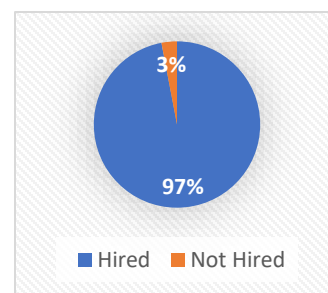
“During my time in London I took two classes, which was just enough to keep me busy but allowed me plenty of time to explore these foreign cities. If going off to college to live alone was not scary enough, moving to a foreign country temporarily was on a whole other level. Despite the anxiety going into it, it quickly turned out to be an extremely rewarding experience. Not only did I get to continue my studies in a different environment, but I also met interesting new people and saw new places that I do not believe I would have had the opportunity to otherwise. It was like opening a window and realizing the world is so much bigger than just my home. There I was, halfway around the world, and life still operated much in the same way it did back home. That was the first preconceived notion to fly out the window, but it wasn’t the last. I had also grown up believing that the US was truly ahead of the rest of the world in terms of innovation and amenities but seeing other countries that had it as good as – if not better than – we did really made me begin to question any assumptions I had made about the rest of the world. Through this experience I began placing greater value on diversity and learning about our differences rather than let differences separate me from others. I learned compassion and tolerance for the situation of others, and my definition of what being “different” means grew to a new perspective. I would say that there is no way I would be what/who I am today if it was not for my time spent abroad, immersing myself in the cultures and traditions of others. This opportunity was not guaranteed for me, and I almost did not get a chance to study abroad due to a minor technicality. If the decision to overturn that technicality was not made, I would have been locked out of what I consider to be my most valuable time spent in higher education. I am also remorseful for every one of my peers that did not get the opportunity, because I can see clear as day where their growth is lacking due to the missing experience. I would highly recommend that study abroad be mandatory, or at least an opt-out rather than an opt-in experience.” (L. Swenson, personal communication, April 13, 2022).



Career Success

Career success begins with the student’s ability to be employed out of college. A study done by IES abroad found that about one hundred percent of students who chose to study abroad were hired within a year post-graduation, while those who stayed at home were only hired 49% of the time.

A few key findings in Erasmus’s Impact Study found that “the share of employers who considered experience abroad to be important for employability also nearly doubled between 2006 and 2013 from 37%



to 64%,” (Erasmus, 2013). Another key finding saw that student’s who studied abroad had better employability skills, because of the experiences they learned while in another country. The last finding that is especially important to consider is that 64% of employers consider an international experience important when considering their candidates.

Discussion

This section will discuss how to implement this study abroad program across the nation and any limitations/push back that may come from it.

Implementation

A good way to implement this plan would be to set aside the tuition a student would have spent for one semester of traditional college and relocate it to money spent on the expenses for the semester abroad. One semester of traditional university tuition is on average \$5000-\$10,000 for in-state, while out of state is around \$13,000- 20,000. These expenses can be easily allocated to funds for a semester abroad. These costs can even be lessened based on the country the student chooses to study in for the semester.

The following are cost to study abroad in specific countries:

- Taiwan: \$3,300 - \$4,050
- Mexico: \$6,300 per year, \$3,150 a semester
- India: \$4,600 per year, only \$2,300 a semester
- Malaysia: \$3,225

These are just a few of the cheaper options for studying abroad that make it accessible to all college students that are already paying the immense prices of traditional college tuition. Other counties, such as Poland and Germany, are more expensive at around \$15,000 a semester. These prices consider both living expenses and tuition costs. (Collier, 2021).

Limitations

With every mandatory plan there will be exceptions. Certain ailments, physically or mentally, can cause a student to not be able to leave the country. These are exceptions that will be considered and discussed between the student and the board of directors when deciding if a student should or should not be required to spend a semester abroad. There are other exceptions that are not based on health, such as whether the student is a part of DACA, which means they are not citizens, but are still legal. These individuals are not allowed to the country without fear of being denied re-entry. Exceptions like these will occur when there is no other option for a student to be able to study abroad safely.

Conclusion

I hope that after reading this report that both the U.S. Department of Education, the college board, and other all other interested parties will be persuaded into considering a mandatory semester abroad for all incoming college students. Looking back at the findings, we know that students in the current day are struggling to communicate effectively, be adaptable to their

surroundings, flexible with changes, and have complete self-awareness that gives them the independence they need to be successful. This lack of skill sets is negatively affecting their confidence but can be aided by a semester abroad in a place outside of their comfort zone. These are the skill sets that are improved most often while studying abroad. The students who engaged in these programs are now more successful in their current personal life, as well as professional life post-graduation.

The costs of studying abroad are much less than many people imagine it to be and can be covered by both in-state tuition and out of state tuition for a majority of students. There are of course limitations to these program and exceptions must be made for specific students with certain ailments.

I hope that this report causes a change to be made to the list of graduation requirements in universities across the nation and that students will have the opportunity to reach their full potential through the implementation of this program.

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