

Going Global: Study Abroad Intentions of Agriculture and Natural Resource Students

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Abstract

Study abroad programs affiliated with colleges and universities all over the world work at developing cultural awareness in students, as well as preparing them to grow academically and personally. While these experiences are encouraged, not all students choose to participate, especially, it appears, students in agriculture and natural resources. This study was designed to search for a better understanding as to why some students choose to participate while others do not, using the theory of planned behavior (TPB). The TPB states a person's behavioral intention is determined by three factors: attitude toward the behavior; degree of social pressure felt to perform or not perform the behavior; and the degree of control over performing the behavior (Ajzen, 1991). As expected, the TPB predictors were highly correlated with intentions. Multiple regression results support the TPB and direct measures of the theory variables predicted 54% of intent to study abroad. The results show the TPB can improve understanding of a student's intention to study abroad and the findings can be used to develop and market study abroad programs in which students are likely to participate.

Introduction

Agriculture is a global enterprise. Consequently, developing leaders who can cope with the mounting complexities of operating in such an expanding world market is becoming increasingly important. "*Arguably, an understanding of agriculture's history and current economic, social and environmental significance, both domestically and internationally, is important for all Americans*" (Doerfert, 2011, p. 11). As students graduate and move into the workforce, international experience will be necessary if they are to help the United States remain competitive in a global market (Moore et

al., 2009). One possible way to achieve this global understanding is through study abroad experiences. Study abroad programs have become the most visible and popular international activity to enrich and broaden students' global competency (Zhai and Scheer, 2002).

For university students, academic study abroad programs may take a variety of forms. Students may participate in fully integrated programs and spend a semester abroad enrolled in an institution in a host county (Dwyer, 2004), while some universities offer semester-long hybrid programs or short-term faculty-led programs (Anderson et al., 2005; Engle and Engle, 2003). Regardless of program length, study abroad programs can have a significant positive impact on the lives of participants (Dwyer, 2004).

Not only are study abroad experiences highly valued by employers (Fischer, 2010), but researchers have demonstrated positive effects that such experiences have on students. Students believe that an international experience will improve their competitiveness in the job marketplace (Briers et al, 2010). The impacts of an international experience stretch beyond the areas of academic success and career development and are seen as being profoundly influential on personal development and intercultural awareness (Dwyer, 2004). Studies have shown that students who study abroad develop a deeper understanding and respect for global issues (Carlson et al., 1990; Kitsantas, 2004), more favorable attitudes toward other cultures (Anderson et al., 2006; Kitsantas, 2004), stronger intercultural communication skills (Sutton and Rubin, 2004), improved personal and professional self-image (Cushner and Mahon, 2002) and better foreign language skills (DuFon and Churchill, 2006; Sutton and Rubin, 2004). In addition, surveys of former study abroad participants consistently

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indicate they believe the experience improved their self-confidence, ability to handle ambiguity, insight into their own value systems and overall maturity (Carlson et al., 1990). In light of the known benefits and the increasing importance of an international study experience, by encouraging participation in study abroad opportunities, agricultural educators can promote “actively and emotionally engaged in learning” (Doerfert, 2011, p. 21) by their students.

Most universities offer a range of study abroad programs to a multitude of countries that provide students with the opportunity to travel and explore the world, gain experience and earn credits toward completing their degrees (Dwyer, 2004) and universities should continually examine the organization, scope and sequence of their international experiences (Briers et al., 2010). Much research has been done on the benefits that study abroad participation has on college students (Acker and Scanes, 2000; Briers et al., 2010; Bruening and Frick, 2004; Dwyer, 2004; Moore et al., 2002). However, little is known about what influences students to choose to study abroad. This is certainly the case within agriculture and natural resources. And although interest in study abroad programs has never been higher among American college students, as few as 1.5% of college students travel overseas to study every year (Williamson, 2010).

In addition to cost and timing considerations, various other factors may influence students’ decisions regarding program choice, including their motivations and their attitude toward the program. Other studies have shown that students have positive perceptions regarding the value of study abroad (Briers et al., 2010); however, there is a shortage of research about how attitudes are formed and what factors play important roles in forming attitude toward the participation in study abroad programs (Nyaupane et al., 2008).

By determining why agriculture and natural resource students choose a study abroad experience and by identifying what factors deter participation in these endeavors, colleges can effectively develop and market study abroad programs in which students will likely participate. This research presents the results of a study performed to analyze the factors which impact the attitude toward and likelihood of agriculture and natural students at Texas Tech University to participate in a study abroad program. The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980) acted as the theoretical foundation to provide an increase in the understanding of the factors influencing students’ attitudes toward their choice to study abroad and the subsequent behaviors. This study aligns with research priority four of the American Association for Agricultural

Education to develop “meaningful, engaged learning in all environments” (Doerfert, 2011, p. 21).

Methods and Procedures

Theoretical Framework

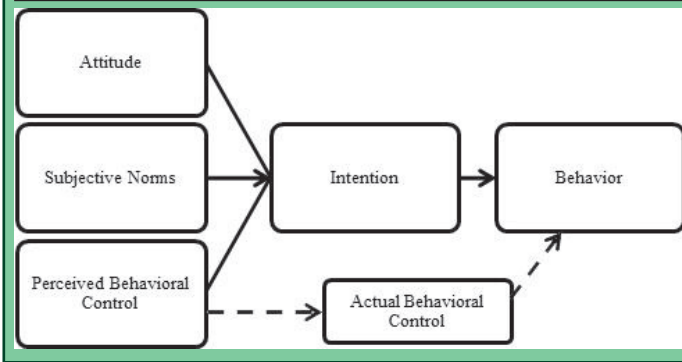
According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (see Figure 1), a person’s performance of a specified behavior is determined by that person’s intention to perform the behavior. Behavioral intention is depicted as a function of three basic determinants: attitude toward performing the behavior, subjective norms and perceived control (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980).

Attitude is the overall belief about something—the evaluative opinion the individual holds in regard to the behavior in question (Ajzen, 1991). The attitude is the degree to which performance of the behavior is positively or negatively valued. Attitudes toward a particular behavior are influenced by a combination of two related factors: affective and instrumental beliefs. The term affective beliefs refers to emotions and drives felt by the prospect of performing a behavior. This is in contrast to instrumental beliefs, which refers to a more cognitive consideration of the extent to which performing a behavior would be advantageous (Breckler and Wiggins, 1989).

Subjective norms are the beliefs that one holds about the normative expectations of others, such as parents, friends, classmates and teachers. According to the TPB, individuals have a sense or belief about whether or not these individuals and groups would approve or disapprove of the behavior. Measures of subjective norms consists of perceived pressure, approval or disapproval from the influential people in one’s life, the pressure to engage in the given behavior and the individual’s motivation to comply (Ajzen, 1991).

Perceived behavioral control is the belief about the perceived ease or difficulty in engaging in the behavior (Ajzen, 1991), as well as any previous experiences with carrying out the specific behavior and any anticipated hindrances. The influence of perceived behavioral control depends on self-efficacy (confidence in one’s own ability to perform the behavior) and perceived controllability if the behavior (Armitage and Conner, 2001). Perceived behavioral control plays an important part in the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991). In fact, the Theory of Planned Behavior differs from the theory of reasoned action in its addition of perceived behavioral control. Although Ajzen (1991) has suggested that the link between behavior and behavioral control outlined in the model should be between behavior and actual behavioral control rather than perceived behavioral control, the difficulty of assessing actual control has led to the use of perceived control as a proxy.

Figure 1. Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980).



Behavioral intention is considered as a mediating factor in the association between attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control on the one hand and behavior on the other hand. The stronger an individual intends to perform a behavior, the greater the likelihood the individual will engage in the behavior. The theory of planned behavior can be useful in designing strategies to help people to adopt behaviors, such as studying abroad.

Purpose and Objectives

This research examined the power of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to predict study abroad intentions of agriculture and natural resource students. The specific objectives were:

1. To identify participants’ attitudes toward studying abroad.
2. To identify participants’ subjective norms about studying abroad.
3. To identify participants’ perceived behavioral control of studying abroad.
4. To identify participants’ intention to study abroad.
5. To predict participants’ intention to study abroad using attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control.

Participants

The target population of this study was undergraduates in the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources at Texas Tech University during the fall of 2011. Of the 1,537 questionnaires distributed, 465 were returned, yielding a response rate of 33.05%. Sheehan (2001) found that the mean response rate for internet surveys was 35% in 1998, 27% in 1999 and 24% in 2000. Sheehan also found that between 1986 and 2000, internet survey response rates continually declined and concluded that response rates for internet surveys were likely to decline further still in the future.

After the exclusion of those who opted out and submitted incomplete questionnaires, the number of valid responses was 402. The majority of participants

(n = 349, 87.0%) were “white,” followed by Hispanics (n = 40, 10%). Four participants (1.0%) indicated they were Black, not of Hispanic origin. Of the other ethnic groups in this study, three participants (.7%) each were American Native/Alaskan Native and Asian and one (.2%) each was Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and Non-Resident Alien. No single grade level dominated the participants’ classification. Almost one-third were seniors (n = 123, 30.7%), closely followed by juniors (n = 112, 27.9%), sophomores (n = 87, 21.7%) and freshman (n = 77, 19.2%). Two participants (.5%) reported they had received a bachelor’s degree. Age of participants ranged from 17 years to 54 years, with a mean age of 21.07 (SD = 4.67). Collectively, respondents to this survey had an average estimated overall GPA of 3.30 (SD = .48).

Instrument

A researcher developed, web-based instrument was used to collect data about the participants’ intention to study abroad. To predict whether the participants intended to study abroad, the questionnaire explored whether the participants were in favor of studying abroad (attitude), how much the participants feel social pressure to do it (subjective norm) and whether the participants feel in control of their participation (perceived behavioral control).

This study employed direct measures of the TPB constructs. Direct questions about engaging/not engaging in a behavior may be methodologically superior to the use of scenarios (Randall, 1989), as they tap what the respondent will do in reality over what the respondent would do in a hypothetical situation.

Attitude. To directly assess attitude toward studying abroad, six items were used. Using 5-point scales, respondents were asked whether they felt participating in a study abroad program was easy/difficult, good/bad, valuable/worthless, pleasant/unpleasant, possible/impossible and interesting/boring. To compute construct of attitude toward studying abroad, the six measures were averaged to create a single scale.

Subjective norms. To directly assess the respondent’s subjective norm toward studying abroad, respondents were asked three questions using a 5-point Likert scale: first, whether they agreed that “Most of the students in CASNR with whom I am acquainted have or plan to study abroad”; second, “When it comes to study abroad, how much do you want to be like your friends?”; and third, how true is it that “It is expected that I participate in a study abroad program.” Mean responses to the three questions were calculated to give an overall subjective norm score.

Perceived behavioral control. Perceived behavioral control was directly measured by assessing the participants' self-efficacy and their beliefs about the controllability of the study abroad behavior. Seven items, using a 5-point Likert scale, measured self-efficacy and controllability. Self-efficacy was assessed by asking participants to report how confident they were that they could study abroad if they wanted. Participants also indicated how strongly they agreed they would have difficulty due to language barriers, costs, financial assistance, inflexible curricular requirements and personal safety. Controllability was assessed by asking participants to report how much they agreed that "Whether I participate in a study abroad program is completely up to me." These seven items were averaged to arrive at an overall measure of perceived behavioral control.

Intention. Behavioral intentions were measured by three items. Each item was measured on a 5-point Likert scale. Participants indicated how much "I have previously considered participating in a study abroad program." They also indicated whether they agreed that "Participating in a study abroad program is something that interests me," and whether "I intend to participate in a study abroad program."

Validity and Reliability. An expert panel reviewed the questionnaire to establish content and face validity. Using pilot data obtained from surveys completed by undergraduates majoring in agriculture and natural resources at five peer institutions, Cronbach alpha values were computed for each construct to assess the reliability of survey items. Cronbach alpha scores for attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control and intent were .87, .67, .55 and .86 respectively. Nunnally (1962) suggested that reliability estimates of .50 to .60 might be high enough in the early stages of research.

Data Collection and Analysis

Participants were surveyed during the fall of 2011 using a modified version of Dillman, Smyth and Christian's (2009) tailored design method for internet, mail and mixed-mode surveys. The design and methods of this study were deemed exempt by the Texas Tech University Institutional Review Board.

This study followed the methodological procedures proposed by Francis et al. (2004) for constructing and analyzing a TPB questionnaire. Statistical analysis was carried out using SPSS for Windows, version 18.0. Standard descriptive statistics were used to analyze the demographic characteristics of participants, as well as measures of attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control and intention. For objective five, regression analyses were performed to test the relationships between constructs in the theory of planned

behavior. Intention was regressed on attitude toward performing the behavior, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control. Davis' (1971) conventions were used to label correlation relationships between variables.

Results

Objective 1: Attitudes

Seven direct measures of attitude toward studying abroad were gauged and then used to calculate an overall attitude construct score. The overall attitude construct had a mean score of 3.89 (SD = .74), on a scale from 1 to 5 with higher scores indicating a more positive attitude toward studying abroad (see Table 1). While the students' attitude was favorable overall, individual instrumental items (whether the behavior achieves something: interesting/boring, valuable /worthless, good/bad) were more positive than the attitudes about affective items (how it feels to perform the behavior: pleasant/unpleasant, possible/impossible, easy/difficult).

Objective 2: Subjective Norms

Subjective norm is the influence that peer pressure has on shaping intent studying abroad. To measure subjective norms, a composite variable was created by averaging the scores of three sources of pressure: perceived intention of peers, desire to be like peers and perceived expectations by others (see Table 2). Each item was rated on a scale of 1 to 5 where high scores reflect greater social pressure to study abroad. The mean of the overall subjective norm (M = 2.66, SD = .77) indicates that on average, the students were only somewhat influenced by other people in their decision to study abroad.

Objective 3: Perceived Behavioral Control

Behavioral controls are the real or perceived logistical hindrances that shape students' intent to study abroad. The perceived behavioral control construct combined seven items related to potential difficulties, the student's self-efficacy and their beliefs about the controllability of the behavior. High scores reflect a greater level of control over participating in a study abroad program or, looked at in another way, lower scores indicated more perceived difficulty in controlling those factors.

On average, students felt the least control over potential difficulty due to costs (M = 2.30, SD = 1.14). Additionally, students agreed that inflexible degree requirements were difficult to control and could prevent their participation in a study abroad program. Worry over their personal safety (M = 3.55, SD, 1.08) was not seen as a difficulty compared to the other barriers. Results showed the students did not feel strongly one way or another about their control over each of the other potential difficulties in this study (see Table 3), since

“3” indicated neutrality on the scale of 1 to 5. Students agreed that they felt slightly confident they could study abroad if they wanted ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.13$) and that the decision to study abroad was up to them ($M = 3.25$, $SD, 1.09$).

Objective 4: Intentions

Table 4 shows the mean values for the items in the intention construct. Analysis revealed that on average, student’s overall intent was slightly positive ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.04$). In general, students agreed they did have interest in studying abroad ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.02$). At the same time, they were fairly neutral about their previous consideration ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.31$) and their explicit intention to study abroad ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 1.25$).

Objective 5: Prediction

In order to determine if the three TPC constructs could predict intent to study abroad, a multiple linear regression was conducted. The multiple regression analysis method relies on the assumption of normality within the data. Statistical tests for skew and kurtosis did not indicate that the normality assumption was violated. A regression analysis was run using the following model:

$$\text{Intention} = \text{Attitude} + \text{Perceived Behavioral Control} + \text{Subjective Norms}$$

Table 5 presents the regression model results for student intentions to study abroad. The overall $F(3, 395)$ value for the model was 154.72 with a p value smaller than .001. Both R^2 and adjusted R^2 for this model were .54, indicating that approximately 54% of the variance in intent to study abroad in the sample can be accounted for by the linear combination of TPB constructs. The results were consistent with the theory predictions that students’ personal attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control influence their intentions to studying abroad. The correlations between the independent variables (Attitude, Perceived Behavioral Control and Subjective Norms) and the dependent variable (Intention) were also examined. Each of the predictor variables had a significant ($p < .05$), substantial, positive correlation with intent to study abroad. Analysis also showed that a combination of attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control significantly explained student’s intent to study abroad. Attitude ($\beta = .53$, $p < 0.01$) had the strongest influence on behavior intention, followed by subjective norms ($\beta = .25$, $p < 0.01$).

Discussion and Summary

This study contributes to the academic literature on the theory of planned behavior, as well as study abroad programs as an

academic program. As expected, attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control all significantly predicted intentions to study abroad, providing support for the original TPB model. That is, students with positive attitudes toward studying abroad, who believed that others would approve of the behavior and who believed they had control over carrying out the behavior were more likely to intend to participate in a study abroad program.

The findings showed that the students’ attitude toward studying abroad was the most important linear predictor of their intention to study abroad. Students who place value on the benefits and see worth in the

Table 1. Attitudes toward Participating in a Study Abroad Program

Item	M	SD
Interesting/Boring	4.54	.80
Valuable/Worthless	4.32	.87
Good/Bad	4.27	.82
Pleasant/Unpleasant	4.09	.90
Possible/Impossible	3.34	1.22
Easy/Difficult	2.86	1.13
Overall Attitude	3.89	.74

Note. Scale of items ranges from 1= negative attitude to 5= positive attitude.

Table 2. Subjective Norms about Participating in a Study Abroad Program

Item	M	SD
Perceived Intention of Peers	3.05	1.04
Perceived Expectations by Others	2.69	1.19
Desire to be Like Peers	2.26	1.02
Overall Subjective Norms	2.66	.77

Note. Scale of items ranged from 1 to 5, where high scores reflect greater social pressure to study abroad.

Table 3. Perceived Behavioral Control of Participating in a Study Abroad Program

Item	M	SD
Control of difficulty due to:		
Personal Safety Risks	3.55	1.08
Financial Assistance Availability	3.45	.94
Language Barriers	3.14	1.08
Inflexible Curricular Requirements	2.68	1.12
Costs	2.30	1.14
Confidence of Ability	3.79	1.13
Perceived Controllability	3.82	1.09
Overall Perceived Behavioral Control	3.25	.60

Note. Scale of items ranges from 1 to 5, where high scores reflect greater level of control over participating in a study abroad program.

Table 4. Intent to Study Abroad

Item	M	SD
Interest	4.15	1.02
Previous Consideration	3.65	1.31
Intention	3.24	1.25
Overall Intent	3.68	1.04

Note. Scale of items ranges from 1 to 5, where high scores reflect stronger intention to study abroad.

Table 5. Regression Analysis to Explain Intent to Study Abroad

Item	r			β	t	p	R ²	Adjusted R ²
	Intent	Attitude	Subjective Norms					
Attitude	.69*			.53	12.28	.001*		
Subjective Norms	.52*	.46*		.25	6.41	.001*		
Perceived Behavioral Control	.46*	.54*	.33*	.09	2.25	.025*		
Model							.54	.54

Note. * $p < .05$

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experience were more likely to participate. Furthermore, the study found that perceived behavioral control, including self-efficacy and controllability, was a factor influencing interests and subsequent choice goals related to study abroad. Thus, students who have the self-assurance that they can effectively participate in a study abroad program are more likely than are their less confident peers to make such academic decisions. The subjective norms were least important in shaping the decision. This is consistent with Armitage and Conner's (2001) findings that several authors have argued it is the weakest component of the TPB. Nevertheless, the positive role played by peers in encouraging study abroad behavior in general is significant in this study. Therefore, the intention to study abroad appears to be a personal choice and, to a lesser degree, influenced by others.

The findings of the current study concur with the theoretical underpinnings of the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991). This support is largely consistent with previous research examining the application of the theory to general behaviors (Armitage and Conner, 2001). Given that all the direct measures of the theory of planned behavior were highly predictive of study abroad intentions, these findings provide useful information for interventions designed to increase study abroad participation in this population. The results of the present study indicate that targeting students' personal attitudes, elements of internal motivation and control and their perceptions of pressure from others may be useful strategies to increase study abroad participation in agriculture and natural resource students.

This research supports many practical implications for marketing within higher education by professors and student services professionals involved in the development, promotion and outcomes of study abroad programs. Interventions designed to change behavior can be directed at one or more of its determinants: attitudes, subjective norms, or perceptions of behavioral control (Ajzen, n.d.). "Early and consistent messages will help students actualize their plans" (Briers et al., 2010, p.18). First, when promoting study abroad programs directly to students themselves, practitioners should emphasize the benefits of opening new career opportunities, gaining an opportunity to grow and develop as a person and exposure to an interesting and/or fun experience (benefits found by Acker and Scanes, 2000; Bruening and Frick, 2004; Moore et al., 2009; Zhai and Scheer, 2002), since attitude had the strongest relationship to and was the best predictor of intention. Additionally, as the cost of study abroad programs was seen as a potential barrier to participation in available programs, practitioners should ensure that costs are kept low and

that grants, scholarships, or other forms of financial aids are readily available and easy to obtain. Furthermore, a series of persuasive communications, as recommended by Ajzen (n.d.), could be developed to show how a study abroad program could fit into existing curriculum/degree plans. It is important to remember that changing one or two beliefs may not produce a change in intent and a multi-pronged intervention, grounded in the TPB, is likely to produce the desired study abroad behavior in this population.

Although TPB constructs predict behavioral intention, intention may not necessarily lead to actual study abroad behavior. Given the possibility of inconsistency between intention and behavior, it is important to examine both intention and behavior in a single study to fully understand the relationship among the three TPB components, intention and behavior. Thus, future research should be directed toward a longitudinal study involving the actual study abroad behaviors as a major dependent variable.

While the research has potential limitations, given the importance of agriculture worldwide, this research represents an important contribution to a dialogue related to study abroad in agriculture and natural resources.

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