

# Traditionally Under-Represented Students' Perceptions of a Study Abroad Experience<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Research has indicated that traditionally under-represented undergraduate students in the food and agricultural sciences continue to be grossly under-represented in the pool of undergraduate students with study abroad experiences. The current study is an assessment of participants' perceptions of an international experience for students from the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources (CASNR) at the University of Tennessee (UT). This program included a semester long for-credit academic coursework, culminating in a two-week study abroad experience. Participants completed a pre-departure survey and a subsequent post-reentry assessment. Analysis of the data indicated that there was significant perceived growth ( $P = 001$ ) in cultural awareness, knowledge of global affairs, interpersonal competence, personal attributes and knowledge of the focal country. Qualitative data corroborated those findings and clarified the data regarding perceptions of empowerment outcomes. The study highlights a particular group of students (i.e., traditionally under-represented) in the agricultural sciences that could benefit from targeted efforts to enhance their opportunities for participation in experiential learning abroad and professional preparation for the globalized world. Limitations of the study such as concerns inherent in short-term study-abroad programs and of self-assessments are noted.

## Introduction

Increasingly, institutions of higher learning are recognizing the value of an international experience to students' preparation for the globalized workplace.

This is primarily because graduates with cross-cultural experiences are in great demand as employers seek employees who have a global perspective and can think critically (Tillman, 2011). The Global Competence report (2005) asserted that given the global nature of America's challenges, a deep understanding of the diverse cultures of the world is an essential component of the 21st century education of the nation's students. That report emphasized that broader global awareness among the nation's future leaders will lead to more effective U.S. foreign policy, greater national security and economic resilience in an increasingly competitive world. Undoubtedly, one of the best ways to achieve those competencies is through traveling abroad (Tillman, 2011). However, the overwhelming majority of the U.S. population has never traveled overseas, with only 20% of the population holding a passport. Not surprisingly then, less than two percent of the nation's undergraduate students participate in travel abroad programs and only 1.4% of food and agriculture majors study abroad (IIE-Institute of International Education, 2011).

The value of intercultural competency in today's global climate has been well documented (IIE, 2011) and an international experience has been widely acknowledged as the best way of developing global and intercultural competencies (Gutierrez et al., 2009; Obst et al., 2007; Tillman, 2011). Students who study abroad exhibit personal and professional attributes that are critical to success in the 21st century workplace. These include autonomy, open-mindedness, willingness to embrace challenges, tolerance for ambiguity and the ability to cope with diverse problems and situations

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(Akridge, 2007; Sutton and Rubin, 2010; Tillman, 2011). Furthermore, a study abroad experience has been deemed invaluable in acquiring overall academic competences and cross-cultural proficiency. A seminal study (Sutton and Rubin, 2010) found that, compared to the control group, undergraduate students who participated in study abroad programs had significantly higher graduation rates and grade point averages and demonstrate better overall cognitive, psychosocial and cultural competencies. The enhanced academic performance and graduation rates were especially profound among at-risk and non-white students.

Beyond the individual benefits, an academic experience abroad has been recognized as an economic and strategic imperative for the United States. For example, the United States Senate (Senate Resolution 308, 2005), in recognition of the importance of study abroad programs, indicated that contemporary global challenges demand intercultural competence and performance. The resolution noted that the security, stability and economic vitality of the United States depended largely on the ability of its citizenry to communicate, negotiate and do business in an increasing global economy and interconnected world. More recently, Hillary Rodham Clinton, the current U.S. Secretary of State, reiterated that thought process when she noted that for the U.S. to maintain leadership in an ever-changing world, it must have a globally educated citizenry. Therefore, she appealed to all American students to commit to expanding their worldview by studying in another country. Further, she implored administrators of American colleges and universities to support study abroad experiences for students (U.S. Department of State, 2011). The broad purpose of the current study was to assess the relative value of a short-term experience abroad program for traditionally under-represented (e.g., racial/ethnic minorities, first generation college attendee, low socioeconomic) students in the food and agricultural sciences at the University of Tennessee. The program was an outcome of the enhanced academic plan of The University of Tennessee and the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources (CASNR) to increase the infusion of international and intercultural learning throughout the undergraduate curriculum. The university has identified key international/intercultural goals for undergraduate student learning and articulated strategies to achieve those goals, including redirecting existing resources and making new allocations to study abroad programs. The program was aimed at enhancing participants' individual development, international understanding and global competence.

## **Profile of Students Studying Abroad**

Despite the dramatic growth in study abroad programs over the last decade, the numbers of students who study abroad remains low and the profile of students in those programs, their preferred destinations and the fields of study have remained constant (IIE, 2011). For example, students who study abroad continue to be overwhelmingly white (80%) and female (64%) and the majority (55%) picks Western Europe (primarily United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, France) as their destination choice. In 2009-2010, African American students constituted 4.7% of students who studied abroad and students majoring in agriculture and agriculture-related disciplines represented only 1.4% (IIE, 2011). These dynamics have led to calls for institutions of higher learning to dramatically increase the diversity of participants, fields of study and destinations of study abroad. For example, Akridge (2007) bemoaned the fact that despite the great achievements made in various areas of higher education over the last 25 years, progress toward increasing diversity in study abroad programs remains dismal. To this end, Akridge advised institutions of higher learning to find ways to increase the numbers of students who participate in international educational experiences, consistent with the broadening diversity of the population of the United States.

## **Barriers to Studying Abroad**

Although various reasons have been forwarded for the low participation of traditionally under-represented groups in study abroad programs, lack of funds has been cited as the single most significant barrier (Akridge, 2007; Obst et al., 2007). Hence, "money" has been deemed the most critical element in improving diversity in study abroad programs. Less affluent families often do not know the value of an international experience or have the financial resources to support their offspring on such an expensive venture (Brux and Fry, 2010). Furthermore, financially disadvantaged students, invariably, cannot forego work study or other employment to participate (Brux and Fry, 2010; Obst et al., 2007). Besides, institutional hurdles such as curriculum rigidities and lack of academic credit for the activity at many colleges and universities have also been cited as obstacles for students (Brux and Fry, 2010).

Institutions, too, have cited financial difficulty as a key hindrance to their ability to send students abroad. For example, Gutierrez et al. (2009) investigated the capacity of U.S. institutions to increase student participation in study abroad programs. Responding institutions overwhelmingly (89%) cited insufficient funds as the biggest hindrance and 83% highlighted the need for more study abroad scholarship opportunities. Other hindrances reported in the study were lack of

faculty leadership and commitment to study abroad and parental resistance due to concerns for their students' safety and security abroad.

Arguably, the disparities and challenges noted above become especially critical for students from under-represented groups. Their dismally low participation in international experiences implies that undergraduates from those backgrounds might be missing out on vital opportunities to increase their capacity for successful leadership in the 21st century (Obst et al., 2007; Tillman, 2011). The current program addressed key barriers by (1) instituting a short term program (2) providing financial support for students (3) awarding academic credit for the course and (4) alleviating potential family concerns about their children's safety by having faculty lead the program. We are unaware of any study that has targeted under-represented groups to examine learning outcomes through study abroad. For this program, the term under-represented referred to students who were first generation college attendees and/or from diverse racial, ethnic and low income backgrounds.

### Program Description and Methods

The program spanned five years, the first four of which was funded primarily by a grant from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to provide scholarships for under-represented students majoring in the agricultural and related sciences. In the fifth year (i.e., the end of the grant period), the university and college subsidized students' cost for the program. To be selected for the program, students had to be in good academic standing as stipulated by the university. Selected participants were required to enroll in a senior level semester-long 3-hour credit course, ANR 491: International Experience in Agriculture and Natural Resources, which involved an in-depth study of the country for the experience abroad that particular year. Topics of study included the focal country's history, cultural norms, government, economy and health and safety issues. Matters within the framework of globalization of agricultural business, markets and trade and other transnational affairs were also studied.

The course culminated in a two-week in-country tour of the focal country during the university's mini-term. Since many students take summer classes, going abroad over the university's mini-term lessened the chance of academic disruption which could potentially delay some students' graduation. Activities for the in-country experiences were arranged in collaboration with either a local university or Ministry of Agriculture. Although the in-country experiences varied by location, typical activities included attending lectures (at local universities, field research stations and/or government

ministries) on agricultural, economic and other issues pertinent to the particular country in the global context. Other activities included students attending and participating in cultural events and interacting with local peers, farmers and entrepreneurs. Ground transportation was by chartered bus; lodging included a combination of local university dormitories and commercial hotels.

The current study examined the self-perceived educational value of an international experience to a group of traditionally under-represented CASNR students. The study assessed the potential influence of the experience as a function of gender and ethnicity. Based on the literature regarding the value of such experiences on other groups (Sutton and Rubin, 2010), our central prediction was that students would report greater competency in all domains assessed from pre- to post-test.

Participants were 53 agricultural and natural resources majors (38 females, 36 Caucasians, 16 African Americans and 1 other). Forty nine of the students were funded to varying degrees depending on their level of financial need. The experience abroad activities took place in three world regions (Africa, Asia and the Caribbean) that are traditionally not targeted by students for study abroad and included five different countries (Ghana (N = 10), Jamaica (N = 24), Thailand and Vietnam (this trip included two countries for three weeks) (N = 11) and Lesotho (N = 8).

Prior to departure, each student completed an 18 item pre-departure objective paper and pencil survey that was developed particularly for the study. Two months after completion of the respective in-country tour, students completed a corresponding post-study assessment and a subjective evaluation of their in-country experiences. Survey items were set on a four-point Likert type scale on which participants indicated the degree to which they agreed (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree and 4 = strongly agree) with statements about themselves and their competencies. The items fitted conceptually onto five subscales: (1) intercultural awareness (four items) (e.g., I have a natural curiosity to learn about cultures other than my own; I am aware of how my own values might affect others); (2) (four items) knowledge of global affairs (e.g., I have a good understanding of the role of the U.S. and other countries in the world; I am aware of the need for personal responsibility in enhancing the global environment) (3) interpersonal competence (six items) (e.g., I possess the ability to cope with unfamiliar situations; I appreciate differences in people); (4) personal attributes (four items) (e.g., I have strong leadership skills; I am good at problem solving) and (5) knowledge of the focal country (one item) "I understand a lot about the people of (name of country). In addition,

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participants responded to an open ended item about their impression of the study abroad program: "Comment on the overall value of the tour to you." Each trip abroad was supervised by at least two of the five participating faculty members.

During the in-country tour, students kept a journal of their activities and experiences. In addition, the accompanying faculty and students met each evening to discuss, analyze, reflect and evaluate the particular day's activities. Upon their return to the U.S., at the beginning of the fall semester, students, as a group, prepared and delivered a presentation about the program to other students, faculty and staff and administrators in the CASNR. Students in the first four years of the program received a grade of satisfactory/no credit for the 3-credit hour course. However, in the fifth year the grading system was modified so that participants received a letter grade (A to F). The study was deemed exempt under federal regulations 45CFR46.101(b) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009).

## Results and Discussion

We used repeated t-test analyses to examine mean change in each of the five domains measured by the pre- and post-test data and qualitative data to assess participants' evaluation of the overall value of the study tour to their personal development. As shown in Table 1, participants indicated greater overall competency on all scales after the study abroad experience than before. For example, on the post-test, students indicated an increased ability to cope with unfamiliar situations, appreciate differences in people and interact more effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. They also perceived themselves to be more autonomous and open-minded, less fearful of traveling overseas, felt better able to solve problems and had a greater understanding of global issues reported a better knowledge of the focal country post- than pre-tour. We conducted multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to examine whether there were significant mean differences based on ethnicity, gender, or country of tour. No differences on any scales were detected as a function of gender, ethnicity, or country. Further, we used students' written subjective feedback about the study abroad experience as supporting evidence for the quantitative data. The data provided a better understanding of and gave deeper meaning to the quantitative data.

The following section provides information, in students' own words, about the international experience. These are in response to the request "Comment on the overall value of the study tour to you." One hundred percent of the participants noted the positive value of the experience to them personally, academically and

socially/culturally. However, the general nature of the comments precluded the separation of the responses into specific themes. For example, several themes were subsumed in the responses (often in a single sentence); therefore, separation of participants' perceptions of the overall experience into distinct domains would detract from the robustness of the assessments. Therefore, a minute sample of participants' assessments of the trip overall is presented verbatim.

*"The value of the tour is immeasurable. I have become a new person because of the experiences provided on the study tour. The tour shall form a basis for me to grow even more in the future."*

*"The tour has changed me...it showed me how narrow my perspective on the world is and how much I want to broaden that. Trip of a lifetime! No class could ever teach as much in a semester as we learned in two weeks."*

*"The trip was amazing. I would have never thought I would be able to or would even want to go out of my comfort zone and travel to Africa. I am glad I did.... Not only did I gain education and experience but also some great friends. This trip has opened me up to all the other possibilities out there for me to experience...."*

*"The trip was the most amazing thing I have ever experienced.... Being pre-professional made me somewhat closed minded to this experience but I wouldn't change any of it. I plan to study abroad again...."*

*"I wish more undergrads and grad students would have opportunities like this. I feel it was an indispensable part of my education."*

*"This is one of the best experiences of my college career."*

*"This was an amazing experience for me. It gave me more confidence in myself.... It made me step out of my comfort zone and I find myself talking to people more than I usually do."*

*"This was the experience of a lifetime. I would encourage everyone to study abroad if possible. It was a great learning experience to be in another culture in a different country. I learned so much about myself, the other students and the people of (name of country)."*

As predicted, participants in the program reported significantly greater overall competency after participation, compared to pre-participation, on all domains of development examined. Their post study abroad perceived enhanced levels of cultural awareness, cross-cultural skills, world knowledge and personal development post study abroad, concurred with the findings of past studies regarding the importance of an international experience to undergraduate education (IIE, 2011; Sutton and Rubin, 2010) and with Tillman's (2011) supposition that a study abroad experience, regardless of its

duration, can potentially provide students with a competitive edge in the job seeking process. However, notwithstanding participants' favorable evaluation of the program, it should be noted that this study did not have a control group for comparison. Therefore, we were unable to ascertain whether there would be differences in perceived outcomes between this sample and a more privileged group. Also, because the study is based on participants' self-assessment and there was no actual measurement of changes in cultural awareness, cross-cultural skills, world knowledge and personal development, we cannot ascertain whether their perceived learning translated into actual knowledge and competence. Therefore, their perceptions might not be reality. Nevertheless, the findings point to the academic and intrinsic value, albeit perceived, of an international experience to the college experience of traditionally under-represented students. The findings may serve to bolster calls for institutions of higher education to make study abroad a strategic imperative for undergraduate education, especially for student of limited financial means. According to the NAFSA (2006) report, colleges and universities must make a special effort "to facilitate access to study abroad for students with varying levels of financial means; study abroad should not be available only to those who can easily afford it" (p. 9).

As positively impactful as participants' perception of the experiential learning was, we are cognizant of the fact that the impact might have been greater had the sojourn abroad been longer or if students had gone abroad on their own. The program was faculty led, tightly scripted and the abroad portion lasted only two weeks (three weeks in one instance). Zamastil-Vandrova (2005) in delineating the drawbacks of short-term faculty led study abroad noted that participants are not exposed to "real" culture shock because they are, for the most part, sheltered from the everyday inconveniences and frustrations that the local people endure. Also, such programs do not allow for cultural and language immersion. Furthermore, participants' almost total dependence on program leaders limits the amount of independence and autonomy that they would have gained on a longer program and one undertaken independently. However, although those limitations were true for the current sample, participants were able to observe firsthand many of the daily hassles and hardships (e.g., poverty) people of developing countries encounter. It is our belief that an experiential learning opportunity in a developing country may have made the experience more valuable for the participants than a study experience in a developed society. This is in light of conventional thought that graduates of food and agricultural sciences disciplines will be expected to strategize and create solutions to daunting 21st century

challenges such as world hunger, poverty and food insecurity.

*Table 1. Descriptive Data for Pretest and Posttest (N = 53)*

| Subscale                    | Pretest |     | Posttest |        |
|-----------------------------|---------|-----|----------|--------|
|                             | M       | SD  | M        | SD     |
| Cultural Awareness          | 3.34    | .32 | 3.65     | .33*** |
| Knowledge of global affairs | 2.75    | .49 | 3.71     | .35*** |
| Interpersonal Competence    | 2.97    | .41 | 3.57     | .34*** |
| Personal attributes         | 3.00    | .37 | 3.57     | .34*** |
| Knowledge of focal country  | 2.02    | .67 | 3.94     | .25*** |
| Total                       | 3.15    | .25 | 3.66     | .27*** |

\*\*\*P < .001  
 Note: Higher scores equal more favorable agreement with the statement.

**Summary**

The study examined the perceived value of a short-term study abroad program to a group of traditionally under-represented students majoring in the food and agricultural sciences. The study highlighted a particular group of students that could benefit from targeted efforts to enhance participation in experiential learning abroad and preparation for competing in the global economy. The findings may have implications for institutions of higher learning and colleges of agricultural sciences, as well as for the students themselves. The fact that participants perceived the international experience as valuable to their personal and academic growth may suggest, as past pertinent studies and other relevant literature have indicated, that institutions of higher learning make study abroad programs a strategic imperative for the undergraduate education. This dynamic is particularly relevant to under-represented groups and agricultural sciences disciplines. Without such experiences, those individuals may be further disadvantaged by being short-changed on vital competencies and skills necessary for success in an increasingly internationalized world.

Finally, despite the drawbacks of short-term programs (8 weeks or less) such as the one described here, they play an important role in increasing the involvement of students in international educational experiences and an even greater role in diversifying the range of under-represented groups in study abroad programs. Accordingly, they "offer flexible international study opportunities to students who might otherwise be unable to participate in traditional programs due to financial, academic, personal, or other limitations" (Obst et al., 2007, p. 15).

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