

Charting *the* Impact *of* Studying Abroad

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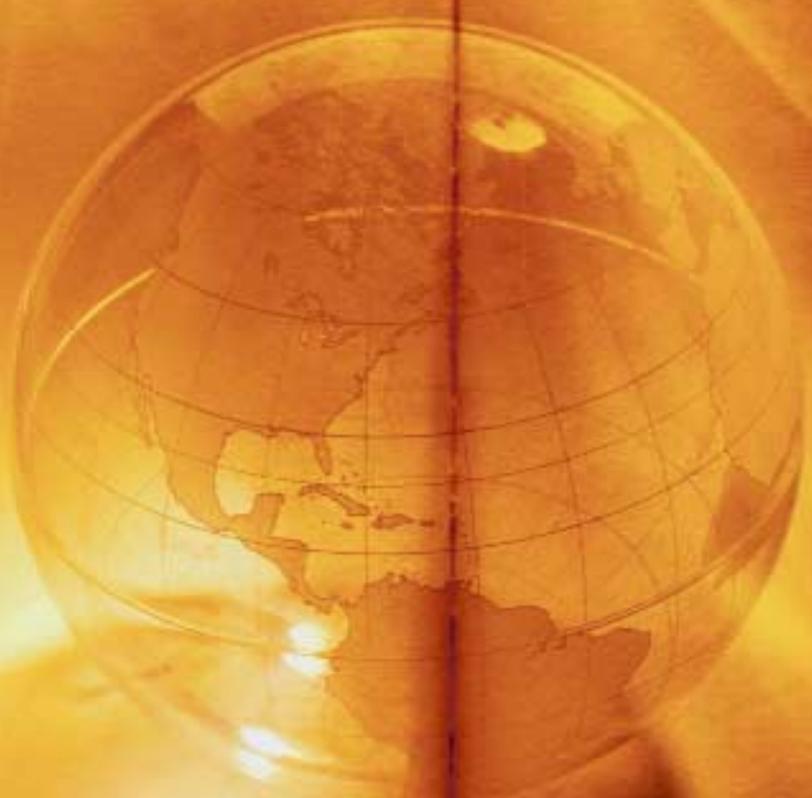
The nature and duration of U.S. education abroad offerings have changed significantly during the past 50 years. How are participants affected?

Given that U.S. students studying abroad are doing so for shorter durations compared to previous generations, there is concern among educators that the lasting academic, language, and intercultural results of an education abroad experience might be declining. A dearth of longitudinal research on the subject has not helped dispel this theory. With that in mind, the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES) conducted a longitudinal survey of 17,000 alumni who had participated in its programs between 1950 and 1999. The study, conducted in 2002, indicates that in spite of shorter terms abroad, participants are still benefiting significantly from the academic, language, and intercultural results of an education abroad experience. Now more than ever, U.S. education abroad students are landing careers with international or multinational organizations. Other notable observations, among those surveyed, are that continued foreign language use and renewed commitment to foreign language study increased substantially during the past 50 years, demonstrating that a wide variety of program models can be academically effective. Also, students are placing more emphasis on education abroad in planning their education, and high schools and colleges are responding by offering more diverse programs at a variety of academic levels.



50s

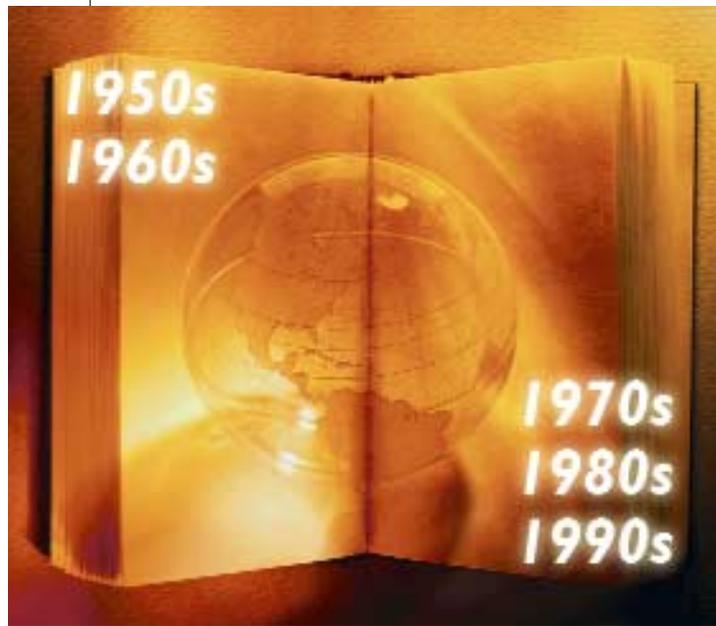
60s



1970s

1980s

1990s



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50 Years of Change

The field of education abroad has expanded significantly since 1950, diversifying from primarily island and foreign university-based programs in the 1950s to a broader assortment of program choices today. Enrollment of U.S. students has more than tripled between 1985–86 (48,483) and 2001–02 (160,920) according to IIE's *Open Doors*. Students' academic interests have shifted from the majority majoring in humanities and social sciences to business majors now representing the largest single academic interest of U.S. students studying abroad.

Once largely the purview of foreign language majors attending elite liberal arts colleges in the 1950s and 1960s, education abroad now attracts more diverse students originating from institutions representing the full array of higher education sectors in the United States. World events, increased crime levels worldwide, and the increasing number of students reporting chronic illnesses require even more emphasis on health and safety and crisis management within education abroad programs.

Despite these and other changes, a dearth of quantitative research exists on the topic of what's changed in education abroad during the past 50 years. A literature review netted no other longitudinal, quantitative study that compared the impacts of studying abroad across decades.

Study Design

In 1997 IES established and disseminated to the field the IES Model Assessment Program (IES MAP), which is a set of guidelines for developing and assessing study abroad programs using the following four categories: student learning environment, assessment of and intercultural student learning, resources necessary for academic and student support, and program administration and development. This study utilized the various measures of the IES MAP to test how well IES was meeting its educational and intercultural program objectives.

While IES has a long history of conducting formative program evaluation within and at the end of every academic term, the IES MAP has enabled IES to conduct more consistent and longitudinal program evaluation research. It allows IES to perform formative and summative program evaluation and alter program design and make improvements accordingly. The survey used in this study was designed using the categories of the IES MAP to make certain that program design intentions were measured summatively.

The primary purpose of the study was to measure the various impacts of studying abroad over a 50-year period (1950 to 1999 academic years). The various impacts of study duration, taking foreign university courses, student housing choices, participating in internships/field study, and language study on a variety of outcome measures

were surveyed. The focus of this article is on how outcomes have changed by decade.

Because IES invests significantly in numerous program evaluation methods for formative purposes every academic term, the longitudinal study was undertaken with the intent of comparing formative measures with longitudinal, summative results. These results are being used for future program design and ongoing program improvements.

In summer 2002, a survey was sent to 17,000 IES alumni who studied for varying term lengths between 1950 and 1999. More recent alumni were not surveyed since less time had elapsed since their study abroad experience, and it would be difficult to infer sustainability of results. Twenty-eight survey questions, many of which had numerous subquestions, were divided into three categories: basic demographics; impact of key study abroad elements; and impact of study abroad on select behaviors, attitudes, and specific achievements.

An overall 25 percent response rate (3,700 of the 14,800 current alumni addresses) was achieved. Most impressively, the 1980s and 1990s produced large response rates of 40 and 41 percent, respectively. A representative sample was produced by: U.S. geographic region, decade of participation in an IES program, and attendance across 25 IES academic centers. This level of response is sufficient to estimate statistical confidence at 95 percent and reliability at 1.6 percent.

Results

The general findings by decade of participation include five significant results. First, consistent with the national study abroad statistics, IES students are studying abroad for shorter duration, with the number of full-year students dropping precipitously. The percentage of students studying abroad for less than 10 weeks has tripled from the 1950s and 1960s to the 1990s. Second, three times as many students in the 1990s versus the 1950s and 1960s have studied abroad prior to participating in an IES program. Third, more than double the number of students used the ability to study abroad as one criterion for choosing their undergraduate college in the 1990s versus the 1950s and 1960s. Fourth, significantly fewer students in the 1980s and 1990s met their spouse/life partner while studying abroad than they did in the 1950s and 1960s. Fifth, consistent with national statistics, IES alumni are delaying or choosing not to have children. (See Table 1, at right.)

Academic Impact

In general, the academic impact of studying abroad is positive and generally consistent across decades; however, there are some significant differences reported. Significantly fewer students in the 1970s through the 1990s enrolled in foreign university courses than in the 1950s and 1960s. Across decades, significant gains have been made in use of a language other than English on a regular basis and in commitment to foreign language study. This runs counter to other research that suggests fewer U.S. students are learning and using a foreign language. Little change has occurred across the decades in the role of studying abroad enhancing interest in academic study and influencing subsequent educational experiences. However, the impact continues to be impressive. (See Table 2, at right.)

Career Development

More than 10 times as many students in the 1990s enrolled in internships while studying abroad as did in the 1950s and 1960s. In every decade, a significant percentage of respondents (on average 63 percent) reported that participating in an internship influenced their career. Graduates of the 1980s and 1990s reported that studying abroad influenced to a greater degree their getting a

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Table 1. GENERAL FINDINGS BY DECADE

	1950-69	1970-79	1980-89	1990-99	TOTAL
Studied abroad for full year	72%	49%	33%	20%	32%
Studied abroad 10 weeks or less	2%	4%	8%	7%	7%
Studied abroad prior to IES	6%	16%	19%	22%	19%
Studying abroad influenced choice of undergrad college	11%	18%	21%	28%	23%
% achieving postgraduate degree	67%	61%	61%	38%	52%
% who met spouses/life partner while studying abroad	13%	5%	4%	3%	4%
% who have had children	75%	80%	63%	19%	47%

Table 2. ACADEMIC IMPACT BY DECADE

	1950-69	1970-79	1980-89	1990-99	TOTAL
Enrolled in foreign university courses	72%	43%	49%	54%	51%
Still use any language other than English on a regular basis	32%	30%	33%	40%	35%
Reinforced my commitment to foreign language study	79%	78%	84%	90%	86%
Enhanced my interest in academic study	83%	78%	82%	80%	80%
Influenced my subsequent educational experiences	91%	83%	86%	89%	87%

Table 3. CAREER IMPACT BY DECADE

	1950-69	1970-79	1980-89	1990-99	TOTAL
Participated in an internship/field placement	2%	14%	17%	21%	17%
The internship experience influenced my career	100%	42%	60%	69%	63%
Provided me an internship that shaped my career choices	45%	41%	46%	54%	49%
Influenced me to get a job overseas	12%	12%	16%	20%	17%
Influenced me to work for a multinational organization in the United States	5%	15%	14%	15%	14%

THE INTERNSHIP EFFECT: ACADEMIC?

Numerous articles have been written on the value of students participating in experiential learning for academic course credit, yet few studies have been conducted about the longitudinal impact of participating in an internship for academic credit while studying abroad. While many academics have softened their historical resistance to experiential learning, there is still a dominant view that internships are nonacademic experiences undeserving of academic credit. Most faculty concede that internships are worthwhile experiences in their own right, but continue to contend that they are unworthy of academic credit.

Research

IES alumni surveyed as part of the 50-year longitudinal study reported that their overseas internships had a significant impact on subsequent career choices and on the development of specific skill sets for the workplace. Students who participated in internships during their study abroad experience were more likely to pursue international careers, obtain overseas jobs, and develop international business contacts than those who did not participate in internships while abroad. Internships also correlated with higher levels of intercultural competence, as measured by continued contact with host nationals, involvement in community activity, and sustained engagement in exploring other cultures. However, participation in internships did not have a measurable effect on academic development or on language acquisition or use.

Every IES student whose language facility is sufficient is encouraged to participate in a foreign university course or an internship/field placement experience for academic credit. A strong academic component (i.e., weekly seminar, written assignments that are evaluated, etc.) is required for participation in an internship. Of the 644 respondents who participated in an IES internship or field placement for academic credit:

- ▶ Twenty-three percent had studied abroad prior to enrolling in the IES study abroad program. Sixteen percent studied abroad after completing the IES program.
- ▶ Forty-one percent enrolled in a foreign university course in addition to taking IES-taught courses.

- ▶ Twenty-eight percent indicated that the ability to study abroad influenced their choice of undergraduate college to attend.
- ▶ Sixty-four percent lived with host country nationals while attending an IES program, while 75 percent of those who did not participate in an internship lived with host country nationals.

Further examination of the responses revealed significant findings related to career development and intercultural development. These findings are statistically more significant for those respondents who participated in an IES internship/field placement versus those that did not while studying abroad. (Cross tabulations of items categorized in the categories of academic attainment and personal/social growth netted no significant differences between those respondents who did and those

who did not participate in an internship/field placement experience.)

Worthy of Academic Credit?

Participating in an internship/field placement experience for academic credit while studying abroad has a significant impact on students' career development. It also has an impact on some aspects of their intercultural development. But is this impact significant enough to justify academic credit? Yes and no. It is if students were to forsake internships due to not receiving academic credit, but it isn't if we are to base the decision on whether or not the outcomes are academic in nature—the survey data indicate that they are not.

Concerning career development, participating in an internship/field placement experience results in a stronger likelihood of acquiring an overseas job. Moreover, it impacts career

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Table 1. CAREER DEVELOPMENT FINDINGS

	% TAKING INTERNSHIP	% NOT TAKING INTERNSHIP
I have participated in international work or volunteer activities since studying abroad	53%	47%
Studying abroad influenced me to get a job overseas	25%	15%
The experience influenced me to work for a multinational organization in the United States	21%	13%
Resulted in career planning changes	15%	11%
Studying abroad allowed me to acquire skills sets that influenced my career path	83%	75%
The internship experience shaped future career choices	70%	N/A
Study abroad ignited my interest in a career direction that I pursued after the experience	70%	60%
I established relationships that became professional contacts	10%	4%

Table 2. INTERCULTURAL DEVELOPMENT FINDINGS

	% TAKING INTERNSHIP	% NOT TAKING INTERNSHIP
Studying abroad continues to influence my participation in community organizations	73%	65%
I met host country friends and still maintain contact	30%	22%
Studying abroad influenced me to explore other cultures	70%	64%

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job overseas or working for a multinational organization in the United States than did previous generations. (See Table 3, p. 17.) (For additional analysis of the impact of internships, see pp. 18 and 20.)

Overseas Employers

Increasingly by decade, more respondents report working (for payment or on a volunteer basis) in private industry or teaching overseas. Fewer report working for the U.S. government. This is noteworthy in that the U.S. government is in increasing need of employees with foreign language skills and international experience. (See Table 4, at right.)

Intercultural Development

While fewer report living with host country nationals in recent decades, they are more likely to still be in contact with host country nationals. Very little difference in results is reported by decade across the other measures on which students were surveyed: studying abroad influencing the respondents to seek out more diverse friends, increasing their appreciation of the arts, continuing to influence their world view, and encouraging them to explore other cultures. (See Table 5, at right.)

Personal and Social Growth

A student's personal and social growth, as affected by a study abroad experience, remains consistently high across decades of the study. Five measures were examined with very positive, lasting results. Consistently high percentages of respondents across all decades reported that studying abroad enabled them to tolerate ambiguity (89 percent on average) and to learn something about themselves (98 percent on average). Across all five decades, more respondents maintain contact with U.S. friends (52 percent on average) they met while studying abroad than they do with host country friends (23 percent on average). (See Table 6, at right.)

What It Means

Regardless of the decade in which students participated in an IES education abroad program, the impact was significant and lasting across academic, career, intercultural development, and personal/social

Table 4. INTERNATIONAL CAREER EXPERIENCE BY DECADE

	1950-69	1970-79	1980-89	1990-99	TOTAL
A paid employee in private industry	9%	23%	25%	18%	21%
A teacher/educator	18%	9%	13%	16%	14%
A paid employee of the U.S. government	11%	6%	5%	4%	5%
All categories reported					48%

Table 5. INTERCULTURAL DEVELOPMENT BY DECADE

	1950-69	1970-79	1980-89	1990-99	TOTAL
Lived with host country nationals	95%	82%	70%	71%	73%
Still in contact with host country nationals	16%	11%	16%	25%	19%
Influenced me to seek out a greater diversity of friends	96%	91%	90%	89%	90%
Gave me an ongoing appreciation of the arts	98%	92%	92%	90%	91%
Continues to influence my perspective on how I view the world	98%	93%	95%	96%	95%
Influenced me to explore other cultures	65%	63%	60%	69%	64%

Table 6. PERSONAL AND SOCIAL GROWTH BY DECADE

	1950-69	1970-79	1980-89	1990-99	TOTAL
Enabled me to tolerate ambiguity	94%	86%	87%	91%	89%
Enabled me to learn something about myself	98%	98%	98%	99%	98%
Met U.S. friends with whom I maintain contact	63%	48%	43%	60%	52%
Met host country friends with whom I maintain contact	20%	14%	20%	30%	23%
Sparked an interest in travel	80%	71%	70%	78%	74%

THE INTERNSHIP EFFECT: ACADEMIC?

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planning and acquisition of skills sets and is more likely to lead to professional contacts.

In the intercultural development area, participating in an internship has noteworthy impacts on continued participation in community organizations, ongoing contact with host country friends, and interest in exploring other cultures. Surprisingly, participating in an internship/field placement experience did not increase the odds of continuing to speak a foreign language on a regular basis.

Given that these results are nonacademic in nature, this study, while strongly supporting the value of internships/field placement experiences overseas for career development outcomes, lends credence to the belief that the outcomes do not necessarily justify the assignment of academic credit hours.

U.S. students feel economic pressures to graduate in four years, receive academic credit for a multitude of college experiences, and benefit their future career plans. Therefore, it is difficult to recommend the absence of academic credit assignment for participation in internships/field placement experiences since it is unknown whether students would opt to avail themselves of the valuable opportunity without academic credit. Also, assigning credit hours allows the experience to include a strong academic component that lends to the overall outcomes this survey measured. Likewise, assigning academic credit to the experience better assures that students will fully participate in the experience. However, on the basis of purely academic outcomes, this study provides no support for assignment of academic credit for internship/field placement participation.

More longitudinal studies are necessary to state with some certainty that U.S. students should not receive academic credit for internship/field placement participation. This study illustrates the value of such research since end-of-term surveys measure only student satisfaction with the internship/field placement experience. Only with time and repeated longitudinal studies across numerous educational models of study abroad will we know with any degree of certainty the concrete impact of internship/field placement participation while studying abroad.

growth categories. However, this study would support the premise that education abroad today has an even more powerful impact on students' careers and getting overseas jobs than in previous generations. This is in spite of the fact that many students are shortening their sojourn.

Despite the decline in students enrolling in foreign university courses in the last three decades, all of the measures of academic achievement and intercultural development have increased or remained the same across generations. Particularly noteworthy are the significant increases in the continued regular use of a language other than English and the positive impact studying abroad has on further interest in studying languages with each subsequent generation. This casts doubts on a popular assumption that to attain academic and cultural benefits a student must be mainstreamed into a foreign university. Although the current dominant model used by IES is the hybrid model, across the five decades of the study a full range of models existed. Therefore, this study would suggest that the same important, lasting benefits are gained from all three education abroad program models: island, hybrid, and total immersion in a foreign university.

Participation in internships has increased tenfold across the five decades of the study. Participating in an internship is having increasingly stronger impact on students' career directions and attainment of overseas jobs, suggesting that prior study abroad experience is valued by multinational and international employers. Since relatively few education abroad programs offer internships for academic credit, this study would support more programs doing so to promote students' future career gains.

Today's students are much more likely to have studied abroad prior to attending college. This is most likely due to increased interest in studying abroad and greater access to programming during high school. Colleges also have played a role by promoting education abroad throughout the college experience; the once traditional tendency to study abroad the third year of college has flattened out considerably. Moreover, more students are likely to study abroad more than once during their college years. This increased interest has implications for expansion of program offerings within the field. It also has implications for designing programs with a greater breadth of course level offerings beyond the upper division courses.

We know that the absolute number of students studying abroad has steadily increased since 1950. However, this study shows that the ability to study abroad may have increasingly impacted students' selection of U.S. undergraduate institutions to attend. This has implications for college admissions offices recruiting methods and college policies that facilitate or impede students' ability to study abroad. One policy that facilitates studying abroad is the transfer of institutional financial aid. Since the IES consortium is composed of selective/very-selective Carnegie-classified colleges, this finding is only generalizable to those higher education institutions.

Regardless of which decade students studied abroad, the academic, career, intercultural, and personal/social benefits were statistically significant, powerful, and enduring. This has policy implications for the support of study abroad by U.S. colleges, parents, and employers.

— Mary M. Dwyer is president of IES.

ABOUT IES

IES is a 53-year-old, not-for-profit, academic consortium with more than 155 selective/very-selective Carnegie-classified U.S. colleges and universities as members. IES was founded in 1950 as the Institute of European Studies, changing its name as it extended its program global reach.

Currently, IES offers 25 study abroad programs spread across 14 countries for more than 3,500 U.S. college undergraduates per year. The majority of these programs (18) utilize the hybrid model, which encourages students to enroll in both IES-taught and foreign university courses. Seven are direct-enrollment programs. In addition, IES provides significant intercultural experiences through planned activities, career-building internships, student housing choices, emphasis on health and safety, and around-the-clock student services.