Executive Summary

Studying abroad is a central dimension in college internationalization. A study abroad experience is associated with cultural learning (Sutton and Rubin 2001, Ritchie 2003, Pearce and Foster 2007), cultural immersion (Carlson and Widaman 1988, Carlson et al. 1990, Laubscher 1994, Gmelch 1997, Lutterman-Aguillar and Gingerich 2002), personal growth (Pyle 1981, Hadis 2005), cultural encounters (Murphy-Lejeune 2002), and career development (Kauffman et al. 1992, Dwyer 2004). The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) identifies study abroad as a high-impact experience with positive effects on student’s performance in critical thinking, real-world problem solving, and effective interactions with others. Emporia State University (ESU) identifies the need for expanding and diversifying international opportunities in its Strategic Plan 2009-2014. Consequently, ESU offers a wide array of study abroad opportunities in more than 50 countries, different formats, and different cost structure. However, student involvement in study abroad has remained limited. The Study Abroad Needs Assessment has two goals, both associated with the need to increase student involvement in study abroad and engagement in college education with global perspectives. First, to understand the preference of ESU students associated with studying abroad. Second, to identify areas of possible intervention and promotion. The survey results suggest students are interested in pursuing an academic experience outside the ESU campus: about 80 percent would consider studying abroad and 60 percent would consider a domestic exchange with another U.S. university. Students have a strong regional preference for studying in Europe and Oceania. The main two reasons for pursuing a study abroad experience consist of gaining cultural experiences and personal enrichment. However, students find little encouragement on campus to study abroad and face real and perceived barriers.
Method

The survey was conducted by the Office of International Education (OIE) in collaboration with Technology Computing Services (TCS). The survey was distributed electronically to all ESU students and remained open during the month of March, 2011. The questions were reviewed and approved by the ESU Institutional Review Board, research protocol 1039. Participation in the survey was voluntary. About 704 students responded the survey, a response rate of about 11.7 percent relative to the ESU student population.

Survey Respondents

Survey respondents were in greater proportion female students (71 percent) and predominately undergraduate students (71.2 percent). Respondents’ mean age was 24.9 and the mode age was 21 years old. Respondents overwhelmingly identified themselves as white (73.4 percent). About 4.2 percent of respondents were international students.

Respondents were affiliated to all ESU colleges and schools. However, there was a greater representation of students from the Teachers College and the College of Arts and Sciences (40.2 and 35 percent, respectively). Fewer respondents were affiliated to the School of Business (14.5 percent) and the School of Library Science and Information Management (8.5 percent).

Interest in Exploring Off-Campus Opportunities

Respondents had a favorable attitude toward embarking on an academic experience outside the ESU campus. About 81 percent said they would consider a study abroad experience before graduation. Similarly, 63 percent said they would likely consider an exchange opportunity with another university in the U.S.

Readiness for Study Abroad

Apart from intrinsic motivation, ESU students were asked about basic conditions that contribute to making a study abroad experience feasible. Expectedly, respondents were prepared in some areas and not in others.

Previous Travel

Most respondents indicated they have traveled overseas at least once (53 percent). Among them, most have been abroad for leisure or vacation (32.4 percent). Interestingly, a considerable proportion of respondents indicated they had an academic experience abroad before completing the survey (26.6 percent).

Passport

Most respondents had a valid passport at the moment of responding the survey (60.2 percent).

Language Preparation

Students are less prepared for studying abroad in terms of knowledge of foreign languages. About 43 percent of the respondents do not speak any language apart from English. From the courses available for instruction at ESU, respondents took courses in Spanish (22 percent), French (7.2 percent), Chinese (7 percent), German (4.3 percent) and Arabic (1.4 percent).

While some students have taken foreign language courses, they may not be fully prepared for studying in a foreign language. From those who took foreign language courses, only 18.7 percent took three or more courses in Spanish. The number drops significantly for other languages: 7 percent for French and 4.9 percent for German. Attrition in language courses limits the student’s ability to choose affordable study abroad options or study in non-traditional destinations. Studying in non-traditional destination is often rewarded by external scholarships or funding opportunities.
General Preferences for Studying Abroad

Destination
Respondents were given the option to mark as many world regions as they wished for a study abroad experience. The top three regional preferences were Western Europe (77 percent), Oceania (65 percent) and Eastern Europe (53 percent). To a lesser degree, students considered Canada (38 percent), Latin America (36 percent), Asia (34 percent) and Africa (23 percent).

Respondents were also given the chance to list as many countries as they wished for a study abroad experience. The top fifteen countries were: France (28.6 percent), Australia (26.7 percent), England (25.6 percent), Italy (23.7 percent), Germany (22.2 percent), Spain (21.2 percent), Ireland (17.3 percent), New Zealand (15.8 percent), China (13.3 percent), Canada (12.6 percent), Japan (12 percent), South Korea (9.2 percent), Scotland (7.3 percent) and Mexico (6.6 percent). In addition, a considerable number of students were open to any destination for a study abroad experience (9.2 percent).

Duration of the Experience
ESU students have a marked preference for study abroad experiences that range from one to six weeks (48.7 percent). In smaller numbers, students said they would consider a semester-long program (34.5 percent). Fewer students would consider studying abroad for a complete academic year (16.5 percent).

Language of Instruction
Students were asked to rank from 1 (most preferred) to 3 (least preferred) the language involved in their ideal abroad experience. Expectedly, students prefer to study abroad in programs where the language of instruction is English (mean 1.73). Respondents also expressed interest in study abroad programs where the language of instruction is English for content courses in addition to courses oriented to learn the host country language (mean 1.75). Expectedly, students are less likely to consider a study abroad experience where the means of instruction is completely in a foreign language (mean 2.45).

Opportunity to Meet International Peers
Students ranked from 1 (most preferred) to 3 (least preferred) their ideal student mix in a study abroad program. Respondents favored programs that integrate American students with international students (mean 1.49). Having mostly international students in the program was a less attractive option (mean 2.07). Finally, respondents were uninterested in programs designed exclusively for American students (mean 2.41).

Relevant Dimensions for Studying Abroad

Drivers for Studying Abroad
Students were asked to rank from 1 (very important) to 8 (least important) several factors viewed as drivers for a study abroad experience.

Respondents were motivated to study abroad mainly because of the destination or country of choice (mean 3.91). In second place, three aspects ranked closely: 1) availability of financial aid or assistantships (mean 4.02), 2) academic quality of the program (mean 4.08) and 3) cost of the program (mean 4.15). In third place was the availability of instruction in English (mean 4.29). Factors that appear to have a smaller
incidence on students’ motivation for studying abroad were: 1) the support received before, during, and after the experience (mean 4.69\textsuperscript{12}), 2) the excursions and trips associated with the study abroad experience (mean 4.94\textsuperscript{13}) and 3) the presence of an ESU faculty member in the program (mean 5.75\textsuperscript{14}).

Understanding Students’ Goals for Studying Abroad

Students ranked from 1 (very important) to 5 (least important) several factors associated with goals for pursuing an academic experience abroad. Students ranked highly two factors: 1) gain a cultural experience (mean 2.15\textsuperscript{15}) and 2) personal enrichment (mean 2.47\textsuperscript{16}). Surprisingly, students were less likely to associate study abroad with enriching their academic career at ESU. For example, connecting the study abroad experience with better preparing for the job market (3.25\textsuperscript{17}), learning a foreign language (mean 3.40\textsuperscript{18}), or exploring the academic discipline in another country (mean 3.45\textsuperscript{19}).

Encouragement for Studying Abroad

Students get limited encouragement for embarking on an academic experience overseas. In effect, several students said no one encourages them to pursue study abroad opportunities (40 percent). Where encouragement is available, it typically comes from outside the ESU campus. For example, friends and classmates (37 percent) and parents (28 percent). ESU faculty and academic advisors play a more passive role in encouraging students to study abroad (27 and 13 percent, respectively). Other students indicated they either get encouragement from family members other than parents or are self-motivated.

Limitations for Studying Abroad

Respondents pondered several factors that represent barriers for considering a study abroad experience. Chief among them is cost (88 percent). Similarly, students are reluctant to study abroad fearing a delay in their academic progress and possibly prolonging the college education (45 percent). This could be associated with the high representation of respondents from the Teachers College, who typically have limited options to study abroad. Concerns revolving world security ranked third (28 percent). Students were less concerned about feeling unfamiliar in another cultural setting (10 percent). Finally, a smaller proportion of respondents were uninterested in studying abroad (9 percent).

Implications and Recommendations

1. Continue Promoting Study Abroad on Campus.

The survey results reveal a significant gap between students’ interest and actual involvement in study abroad. The OIE launched in spring 2011 an on-campus campaign to promote study abroad, in collaboration with the faculty who opened their classroom for a 15-20 minute talk on the study abroad options offered at ESU. This campaign must continue to ensure more students know about and take advantage of this opportunity. Similarly, this campaign can emphasize the countries identified as “high priority” in this survey and address some of the most pressing concerns that prevent students from engaging in study abroad. For example, cost, access to financial aid, and credit transferability.

In an effort to promote study abroad, the OIE could design a structure in which students who return from a study abroad experience have the opportunity to share their experiences with other
students. Finally, it is evident that there is room for the campus at large – including academic advisors and faculty members- to become more actively involved in encouraging students to consider studying abroad.

2. Confront Foreign Language Limitation.
ESU students have limited preparation in foreign language, which could limit the student’s interest in studying abroad. The OIE will confront this reality by promoting more actively academic experiences in which students can either study in English or combine language instruction with discipline-specific courses taught in English.

3. Expand Short-Term Programs Offering.
ESU students face real limitations for studying abroad, among which cost, family commitment and uncertainty about credit transferability are salient. Respondents have a marked preference for short-terms programs, which typically take place during the summer. The OIE will explore the possibility of expanding short-terms opportunities using a combination of faculty-led programs and our network of partner universities and study abroad providers.

Finally, the OIE will continue working with the Teachers College in defining a program that will enable students on a teaching track to partially fulfill the student-teaching requirement at an overseas school.

4. Emphasize the Connection Between Studying Abroad and Academic Preparedness.
The survey results suggest students do not fully appreciate the implication of studying abroad on their academic life or future professional career. The literature constantly supports study abroad as a means for preparing students to a more globally-focused labor market. This is a matter of education to the campus community at large and requires strategic and intentional communication with students.

Bibliography


