

Empirical Results on Cultural, Business & Academic Immersion in Short-Term Study Abroad Program

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ABSTRACT

This research study provides an analysis of student's responses to a satisfaction survey over a specific period of time (three years). During the last decade one of the evolving trends for higher education institutions have been to develop and implement successful short term study abroad programs that combine academic, business and cultural immersions for participating students. This study provides evidence of the effectiveness of short term global study abroad program to inform students' cultural immersion, greater understanding of global business and cultural appreciation. Using survey data gathered from participating students, the data shows high level of satisfaction with cultural aspects of the trip and business immersion and less satisfaction with the academic content. Various studies and articles have explored the validity and qualitative representation that study abroad programs provide to students. This paper brings to focus the intrinsic value and effectiveness of global business education by studying the International Field Study program. The study measures the students' perceived intrinsic value of the immersion program utilizing a self-reporting study methodology. Data for this analysis was gathered from students who have participated in the field study and voluntarily completed a 31 item questionnaire as well as provided free responses on any of the specific questions. In order to analyze the study's research questions, correlation analysis was conducted on the three immersion areas using non-parametric statistical techniques, including correlation analysis.

INTRODUCTION

A short-term study abroad component allows students to be immersed in the cultural, business and social environments in a global setting. The experience, formally called the "*International Field Practicum*", is a capstone and inherent part of the graduate curricula of this small urban college. Students participate in this short-term study abroad program while enrolled in a course titled, Global Business & International Practicum in their last semester of study. The duration of the trip is approximately ten days and students work

together in groups prior to, during and at the conclusion of the study abroad program and for the duration of the 15-week course.

Included in the study abroad program are seminars, lectures, meetings and cultural immersion trips abroad as facilitated by faculty, staff and partners of the School for Business. This study aims to investigate the perception and level of satisfaction of students in the MBA program about the short-term study abroad program. For this study, data was gathered from participants over a four year period, however for this research study focus on the last three years (2011-2013) since the original survey instrument was modified in 2011. There is currently little research on short-term study abroad programs that measure students' satisfaction that is linked to academic, cultural and business immersion.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Mills, et al., (2010) defines the short-term experience “lasting from two weeks to three months” (2010, pp. X). The growth of short-term study abroad programs in institutions of higher education can be attributed to many different factors including the changing demands of students. These students are demanding a sophisticated and advanced global network of the business environment, employers', culturally sensitivity, employee global awareness, and the marketability of such programs that incorporate a study-abroad component for universities to attract new learners. “As universities continue to develop and expand short-term study abroad programs, it is important to have program formats that will attract a variety of students and provide programs that will not place students in an environment where their comfort zone might be stretched beyond their ability to adapt (Mills, et al., 2010 p. 12). The students of the School for Business graduate programs reported in the survey, which is discussed in this paper, the importance of the study abroad experience and the role that the program plays in their growth as professionals. Another influential factor in creating short-term programs is the globalization of our economy, the need to prepare our students with the knowledge and skills to conduct business at international level (Tarrant, 2010).

This form of academic programming and subsequent growth in recent years points to the increased diversity of the labor market in and outside of the United States. Figueiredo and Mauri maintained that “Experiential learning has been used increasingly in management education and is not a new concept” (2012, pp. 369). According to the National Association of Foreign Student Advisers (NAFSA) in the 2010-2011 academic years, only 273,996 U.S. students studied abroad for academic credit. The number of students studying abroad still represents about 1% of all U.S. students enrolled at institutions of higher education in the United States.

The decision to incorporate a short-term versus a long-term study abroad program in the curricula of the School for Business is motivated by the composition of the student body, who are employed full-time and have other personal and professional obligations. These circumstances prevent students from participating in activities away from home for extensively long periods of time. In fact, the previous format of the trip before the redesign, required participation in the host countries for 14-full days including travel.

The current designed format involves 10 days of immersion with travel for the entirety of the trip. As described by Mills, et al., “the need for students to be prepared for today’s global work environment abroad as well the increasingly multi-cultural work environment within the United States, the desire for universities to meet the growing student demand for study abroad opportunities that fit the needs of traditional, non-traditional, and first generation college students, and students make the connection between their experiences gained through study abroad as they relate to marketable job skills, are driving growth in short-term study abroad programs” (2010,pp. 2).

The difference between short-term and long-term study abroad programs is dependent on the length of time that students are immersed in the host countries. As discussed previously, the short-term model works best for the students of the School for Business and this model, in terms of length of time, can be defined where students are engaged for a few days to a few months. Condensing the previously fourteen days long program to ten days, may appear to not have a meaningful impact on the program itself, indeed, as reported by Oldford “...while these short-term programs tend to be one to three weeks in length, they are intense and participants typically spend upwards of ten hours a day with each other” (2010, p. 4). The program developed by School for Business aims to do just that by incorporating a global field experience that students will be able to relate in meaningful ways to their professional and personal development.

METHODOLOGY

The measurable outcomes of the international field study program are (1) to immerse students in different cultures in order to apply the cumulative knowledge and skills acquired from the MBA curricula in an international setting, (2) to allow students to work in an interdisciplinary group setting within a multicultural global business context, and (3) to apply the theoretical frameworks to solve real business issues and address contemporary challenges of global business. The *program goals* represented above are separate and independent of the research goals/questions. However, by addressing the research questions, these program goals can assess and refined.

Overview of School for Business & MBA Programs

The college studied is a small urban college, located in New York City, with enrollment at 1,200 students, 62 percent being undergraduate and 38 percent graduate students. The College was founded on a unique educational model, in which students are required to develop their own synthesis of accumulated knowledge gained through these various disciplines in order to apply their knowledge to real-life opportunities. The majority of the students are adult learners, full-time students and working.

The curriculum is a lock-step, where students work on a project related to their interest and demonstrate their knowledge through a project. Instead of students focusing on a particular discipline or set of disciplines, students are asked to accumulate the knowledge needed to be effective in particular performance areas. These performance areas provide students with an inventory of knowledge that transcends traditional disciplines and allows them to focus on the relevance of the subject matter to the performance area that is the

current focus of the particular semester. The *Global Business & International Practicum* course requires students to demonstrate their knowledge.

Research Objectives

This study used a quantitative, non-experimental, correlational (explanatory) and comparative (exploratory) research survey designed to examine the relationship of various variables on the three major area of “*International Field Practicum*”. The research questions addressed in this study are:

1. Are students satisfied with the academic immersion in the short-term study abroad program, in order to inform program improvements and modifications?
2. Are students satisfied with the cultural immersion in the short-term study abroad program, in order to inform program improvements and modifications?
3. Are students satisfied with the business immersion in the short-term study abroad program, in order to inform program improvements and modifications?

Previously, the international field study program was not integrated into a course or the curricula of the MBA programs, a change that occurred four years ago. The trip was not linked to student learning outcomes and/or student deliverables and therefore no assessment of the trip was conducted. The activities scheduled in the international settings had little-to-no academic relevance and therefore, no follow-up was conducted upon return from the trip. The School for Business worked with local and international partners to redesign the program. The team worked to bring intrinsic value and cognitive development for the students taking part of the program. The redesigned program was launched for the travelling class in 2010 and has continued in that format to present. This newly action-oriented program is tailored to ensure that students have the opportunity to work collaboratively in a pan-cultural environment in which they are exposed to new business cultures and given the opportunity to explore them.

Study Design

The study design is a case study using casual correlation data, which is appropriate to assess students’ satisfaction in their international field study and to examine the relationship of variables to the three immersion areas. Participants were encouraged to complete an anonymous voluntary self-reported survey completed over the internet. A 31-item survey was designed to capture data on student’s satisfaction of three major items: (1) cultural immersion, (2) academic content and, (3) overall satisfaction with the field immersion. Surveys were administered to participants at the conclusion of the trip upon return back to the United States. Students were sent a direct link to the survey using Survey Monkey requesting their completion of the survey within a stated timeframe; usually two weeks although time have been extended to secure a higher response rate. Reliability and validity of the survey instrument was established in 2009, when the survey was first utilized to gather students’ satisfaction. Subsequently changes were made to the survey to enhance the collection of data specific to the three major items. The surveys allowed us to collect quantitative and qualitative data. The questions focused specially on three key areas: academic content, business immersion and cultural

immersion. Each section included questions on the survey that were either on the 5-point Likert scale or open-ended.

The academic content of the survey was designed to measure the impact of the short-term study abroad on student’s overall satisfaction and participation of their study abroad program. In the case of the business immersion, the questions in this section were designed with the purpose of measuring satisfaction levels for the business presentations that took place during the study abroad program.

The cultural immersion section in the survey, asked the student about the multicultural and diversity experience as they visited two European countries during the study abroad program. Some of the questions asked students about their ability to appreciate and understand non-US issues and topics. The full survey is found in Appendix A. Appendix B highlights some of the open-ended responses from the students that participated in the study abroad program during the years: 2011-2013.

RESULTS

The study holds potential importance for a variety of practical, policy, theoretical, and methodological considerations. A number of similar themes were established during the research study as students were engaged in the same program. In 2011 the survey was completed by nine students, in 2012 by 28 participants and 2013, by 27 students representing 25.71%, 46.67% and 50.88% respectively, Table 1. The survey consisted of 32 questions in Likert scale and 16 open-ended questions. Survey results show that over the 3 years students were *very satisfied* or *satisfied* with the overall experience of the field study or short-term study abroad program. In 2013, 96% of students were very satisfied or satisfied with the experience. The second subject matter of this study relates to the academic content; over the 3 years of the study the majority of students were very satisfied or satisfied with the academic portion of the program. In 2012, a 100% of survey participants were very satisfied or satisfied with the academic content. The last three years demonstrate an increase in survey response rates, which represent an adequate sample size to justify the research results.

Summary of Responses to Survey

Table 1 reports overall number of trip participants with number of student responses to survey for 2011, 2012, and 2013. In 2011 only 9 students out of a total of 35 completed the survey. Numbers improved in 2012 and 2013 but still

Year	Trip Participants	Responses	Percentage
2013	35	9	25.71%
2012	60	28	46.67%
2011	57	29	50.88%

represent only 50% of participants. More student participation is necessary. That means new and adequate techniques to encourage students to participate in future surveys.

Overall Level of Satisfaction

Table 2 below presents a distinguished rising trend from overall students dissatisfaction

Table 2: Overall Level of Satisfaction

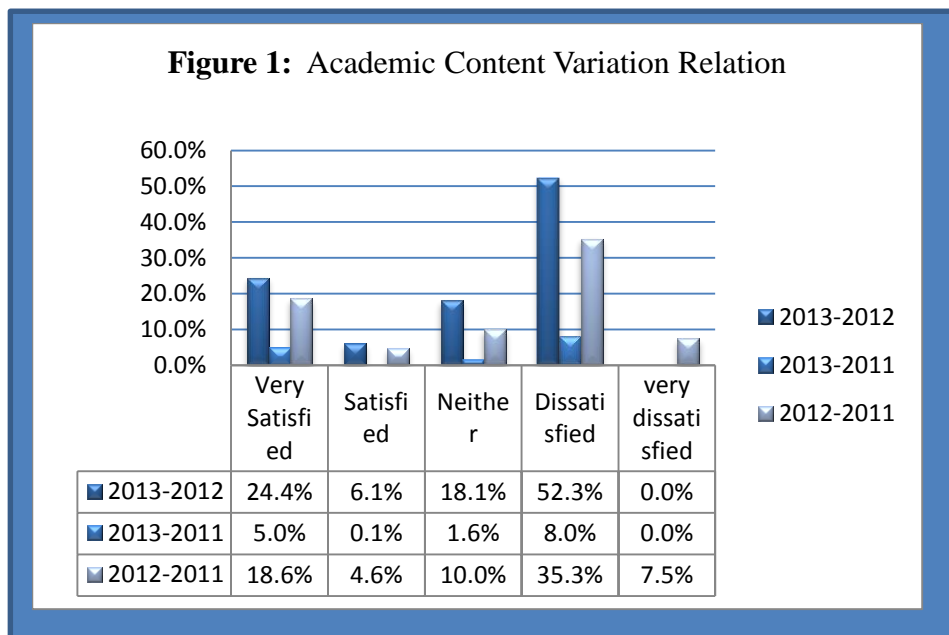
Year	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neither	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
2013	51.9	44.4	3.7	0.0	0.0
2012	35.7	64.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
2011	33.3	22.2	22.2	22.2	0.0

from 2011 to satisfaction in 2011 and very satisfied in 2013 with the overall experience of the field

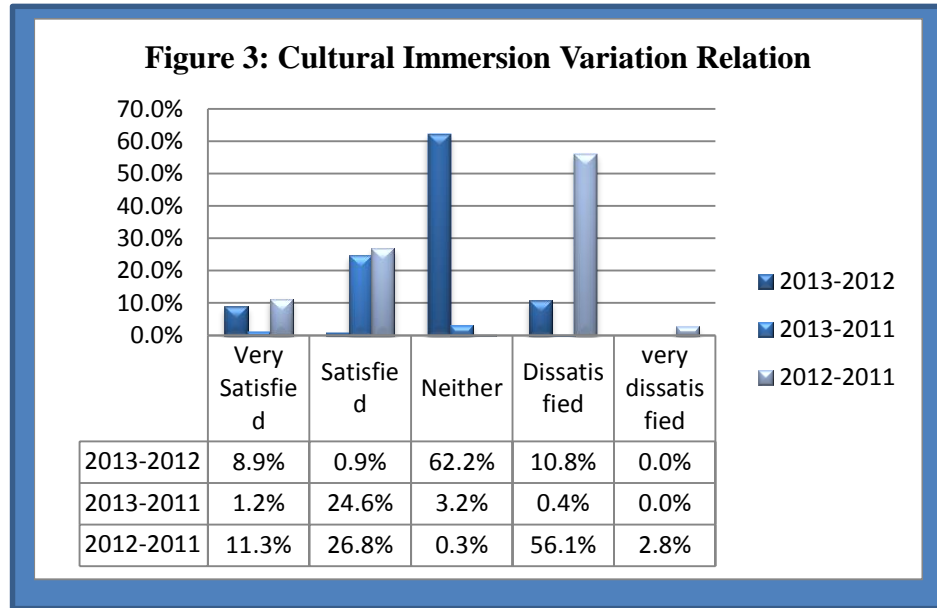
study or short-term study abroad program. In 2011 there were 9 out of 35 participants who responded to the survey. Responses indicated that 33.3 % were very satisfied, 22.2 % were identified within survey category of satisfied, neither and dissatisfied. In 2012 there were 28 out of 60 participants who responded to the survey. Responses indicated that 35.7 % were very satisfied and 64.7 % were identified within survey category of satisfied. In 2013 there were 29 out of 57 participants who responded to the survey. Responses indicated that 51.9 % were very satisfied, 44.4 % were satisfied and 3.7 % identified as neither.

During the correlation analysis we discovered that the questionnaire needs to be improved to better evaluate all three components of the international trip.

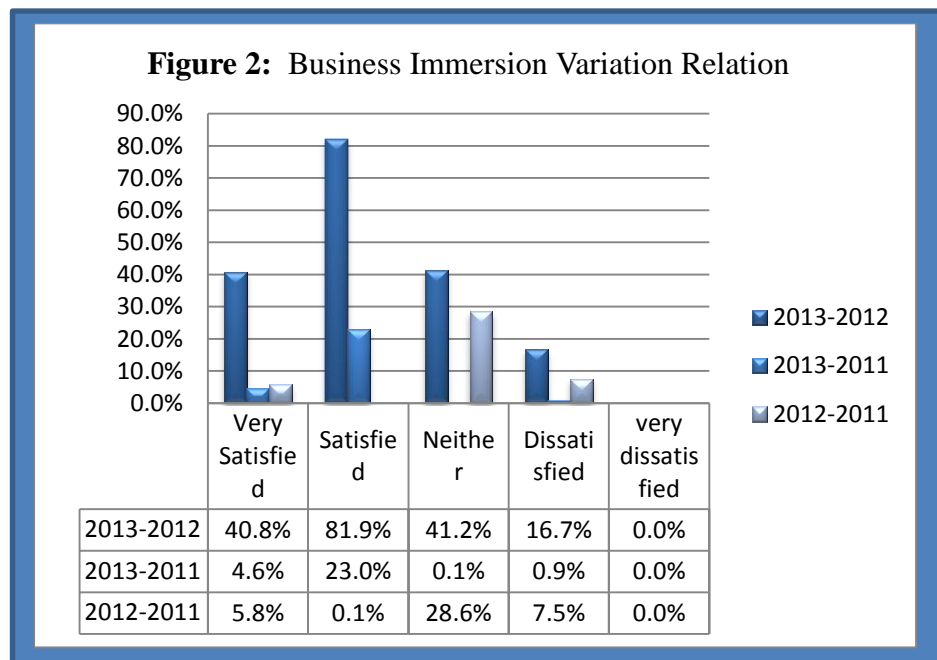
Data represented in the Figure 1 below indicates that more likely than not there is 52.3% a relation in participants survey responses within dissatisfaction survey category for academic content for 2013 – 2012 comparing to 35.3 % for 2012 - 2011. In addition trends for survey’s categories for very satisfied and satisfied are steady going up.



Data represented in the Figure 2 below indicates that more likely than not there is 81.9% a relation in participants survey responses within satisfaction survey category for business content for 2013 – 2012 comparing to 0.1 % for 2012 - 2011. In addition Figure 2 displays rising trends for relation in participant’s responses in very satisfied survey category. It is more likely than not there is 5.8 % a relation in participant’s survey responses within very satisfied survey category for business content in 2011 – 2012 and 40.8% in 2012 -2013.



Data represented in the Figure 3 below indicates that more likely than not there is 56.1% a relation in participants’ survey responses within dissatisfaction survey category for cultural content for 2011 – 2012 comparing to 10.8 % for 2012 - 2013. Further, data indicates that more likely than not there is 62.2% a relation in participants’ survey responses within dissatisfaction survey category for cultural content for 2012 – 2013 comparing to 0.3 % for 2011 - 2012. In addition Figure 3 displays dropping down trends for relation in participant’s responses in very satisfied and satisfied survey categories within cultural content.



DISCUSSION

Over the course of the last three years participants in the international practicum have reported high degree of satisfaction with their overall experience in the field including the cultural, academic and business immersion as reflected with the 83.93 percent average score. The highest level of satisfaction was reported for the cultural immersion component of the trip and followed by the business immersion and academic content. Interestingly none of the respondents in the anonymous survey that they were “dissatisfied” nor “very dissatisfied” with the overall immersion. On average only 1.5 percent of respondents reported that they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

Cultural Immersion

Students reported very high satisfaction levels with the cultural content of the field study immersion, averaging approximately 90 percent for the three years. The cultural content allowed students to learn about the cultural and business environments of Frankfurt and London. Activities included visits to famous landmarks, museums, business districts, and business oriented tours as well as local and fine dining. Participants generally rate these experiences very favorably as they also present an opportunity to interact and mingle with local cultures and leave the urban, business centers, to a more picturesque and scenic locations.

Academic Content

While students reported a high satisfaction level with the academic content of the field study, this was driven mostly by the speakers and presentations by highly experienced professionals. For example, students reported significant satisfaction with the Chief Executive Forum, which is a panel discussion of business issues of by four highly accomplished CEOs. These survey findings suggest that students consistently wanted to interact with senior level executives who can share and impart professional advice and knowledge about their respective industries and experiences within the business arena. One such presentation is by a high profile CEO in the telecommunications industry that structures his presentation on not only topical business issues, but also infuses practical and professional career guidance and support for the students. The presentation thus imparts business knowledge as well as real-world sensibility and advice for students who are nearing the completion of their MBA degrees.

Additionally, included in the academic content is the team project where participants are required to work with their fellow colleagues in pre-designated teams for the first time or have had limited interaction or teamwork prior to this course and trip. While there was less dissatisfaction with the team aspect of the project, we suspect that the apprehension with the project and/or working within the pre-designated team may account for the great deal of apprehension that was reported. On average a quarter of the respondents did not like the teamwork-related project assigned for 2011 and 2012, which was reduced to only 7 percent in 2013. This result is explained by changes in the entire graduate curriculum. These changes required the 2013 field study group to work with their fellow colleagues more frequently across the courses and thus become more comfortable with a team setting. This finding also suggests that there is still opportunity for participants to

develop their skills to function within a team, especially when immersed in a new environment.

Business Immersion

Respondents overwhelmingly indicated that they can operate as a professional businessperson in a global setting. For the past three years, approximately 88 percent of the participants reported that the business immersion of the trip was either satisfactory, with those indicating “very satisfied” to those reporting “satisfied”. Those reporting “neither satisfied nor dissatisfied” declined to 7 percent from the previous 11 percent for 2012 and 2011. Specifically students reported that the immersion broadened their global management perspective and exposure to global business, which were one of the intended goals of the immersion with 89 percent in 2013 reporting “very satisfied” or “satisfied” and 81 and 89 percent in 2012 and 2011 respectively. Respondents were satisfied with both the geographic locations and the business content delivered at these locations. These range from individual presentations on business trends to overview of topical business issues.

CONCLUSION

The primary focus of this research is to examine student’s satisfaction with their international field study and specifically the academic immersion, cultural immersion and business immersion. The results offer insights to the research questions of this paper as discussed previously. Overall, students were very satisfied with the short-term study abroad program as a whole. This high satisfaction level can be attributed to the business and cultural immersion of the program and less so for the academic component. Review of the qualitative responses compliment the academic immersion satisfaction ratings where results show students were less satisfied with the group project and weren’t prepared or equipped to handle the academic requirements of the field study program. Dissatisfaction levels with the academic component of the program can further be attributed to the requirement of team work of the participants, where team members were chosen randomly for each trip and assigned by the administration and faculty. On the contrary, the business immersion presented trip participants with the opportunity to engage with quality, senior-level speakers (for example, CEO’s, managing directors, and subject-matter experts). This further allowed the immersion of students in high-level discussions of interest and direct relevance to them in terms of business and professional topics. Students found these discussions and presentations to be of great value to the applicability not only for the project and course, but also in the real-world value to their career paths. The cultural immersion overall registered high levels of satisfaction due to no academic requirements, less preparation required of students in advance and less strenuous rigors than the academic component.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that this short term study abroad program provide students with significant opportunities to explore academic content, business immersion and cultural immersion within a global setting. Benchmark of 50 % or above indicates that there is a high relationship between variation of student answers from one to another year, whereas below 50 % within variation of student answers indicates that more likely then not the answers are random.

Research Limitations

Although this research was carefully prepared, there were some unavoidable limitations, that include:

- The most questionable aspect of web-based survey data is whether a representative sample of the target population will have the opportunity to respond.
- There are a variety of technical glitches that can occur while a student is filling out a survey.
- A lack of a trained interviewer to clarify and probe can possibly lead to less data.
- Students may not be fully aware of their reasons for any given answer because of lack of memory on the subject, or even boredom. At the end of the day, students may not feel comfortable providing answers that present themselves in an unfavorable manner.
- Student's workload is at maximum capacity during this semester. They are expected to complete all regular assignments for each class, the group project program and other assignments related to the study abroad program.
- The fact that the trip occurs mid-semester can create conflict with students schedules and other time constraints so students feel the survey is not as important.

Future Research

The findings of this study present a number of inviting opportunities for future research, few are listed below:

1. In the future we will make changes to the survey in order to have clear results in the areas that have an impact in the student experience. The new data will compliment this study.
2. Future research can be developed to expand the scope of this particular study and evaluate the impact of the short-term study abroad program for the participants over the years. Ideally, we will develop a survey and interview process for alumni to analyze the impact of the study abroad on their professional life.
3. Since this particular study did not explore study abroad experiences by length of program or location of study; in the future we can add a number of questions seeking to understand the relationship between study abroad and intercultural competence development.

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