

## Parallels: First Semester of College USA and First Semester of Study Abroad Transitions

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*American students are participating in study abroad programs in increasing numbers. While there is significant research on the first year of transition to college, little is known about the study abroad student's first semester in the program. This study is designed to determine the parallels, if any, between student transition experiences during the first semester of college in the USA and the first semester of study abroad for American students. The research indicates that students planning to study abroad are in need of increased information on transition issues and that study abroad students often face issues more challenging than those of their first semester of study USA.*

American students are studying abroad in record numbers. The growth, up by 11.4% from 1995-96 to 1996-97, has continued for ten years, and in 1996-97 nearly 100,000 American college students participated. These study abroad opportunities lasted from a few weeks to longer than an academic year (Desruisseaux, 1998).

There are numerous issues associated with study abroad. While there is a wealth of experiential and research-based information about freshman transitions to college, there is relatively little information focused on the transitions American students must make during the first semester of study abroad. The American study abroad student will usually face a major life change, and it would be useful to know if student transition experiences are parallel between to the first semester of college in the USA and the first semester of study abroad for American students. This study researches these parallels and, in addition, compares the anticipated experiences of students preparing to study abroad with the experiences of students who are currently in, or who have already completed, a study abroad program.

### Method

#### Participants

The 46 American study abroad students who participated in this study were undergraduate students from one institution who studied at a different country's host university for one or two semesters. The students were, at the time of this study, in one of four stages of the study abroad experience:

- **Preparation:** preparing/planning to begin a study abroad experience within a semester.

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- **Abroad:** currently studying in host countries.
- **Return:** just returning to the home university after completing study abroad experiences.
- **Removed:** having completed at least one semester of study after returning home from study abroad.

Students classified as Abroad, Return, and Removed were, for purposes of this study, classified together as “Experienced” students. For this study, there were nine students in the Preparation stage and 25 in the stages identified as Experienced.

The Preparation and Experienced students’ home institution is the main campus of a Doctoral II Land Grant university in the northwestern United States. The Office of International Education (OIE) supports numerous international education functions: a resource center, grant writing, international students, faculty research, program development, and study abroad. It should be noted that the institution has no centralized Freshman Year Experience program. The undergraduate students are primarily in-state from a state, which is often described as geographically large, rather culturally homogeneous, sparsely populated, and having a low per capita income. As one might expect, it is not a major hub of international activity. Nonetheless, the students have shown an intrinsic initiative to study abroad despite the additional personal expense incurred with the program.

## Instrument

The questionnaire, which was given to each Preparation and Experienced study abroad student, measured anticipation of, or reflection on, his or her individual study abroad experience. Four elements were addressed within the questionnaire:

(a) demographics, (b) impact of transition experiences, (c) comparison of the first semester USA and first semester abroad, and (d) perceived institutional support (Borland, 1999). This study, however, is focused on data generated about the first semester of the study abroad experience. The reliability-established instrument that became “part c” of the questionnaire was originally designed by M. Lee Upcraft (1991) and normed on first semester experience data.

The 42-item questionnaire required a forced choice response, and was adapted (with permission) from Upcraft’s 1991 study of the freshman experience. Students were asked to answer “True,” “False,” or “Not Applicable” to each item/issue as they reflected upon their first semester of college. They were then asked to answer the same questions regarding their study abroad experiences (for Experienced students) or their anticipated study abroad experiences (for Preparation students).

A panel determined that the seven items relating to housing and grading practices were not applicable due to vastly different USA and abroad pedagogical, curricular, and co-curricular practices, and those seven items were eliminated. The instructional text and the adapted list of 35 items/issues are listed in Table 1.

TABLE 1

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**Questionnaire**

Place a T for true, F for false, or X for not applicable across from each statement about your *first semester of college in the USA* (center column) and your first semester of study abroad (past, current, or anticipated) (right column):

1. Worried about finding new friends
  2. My family was supportive
  3. Experienced loneliness
  4. No one seemed to care
  5. Had a difficult initial adjustment
  6. Experienced shaken academic confidence
  7. Did not study enough
  8. Trouble adjusting to larger class size
  9. Had a helpful academic advisor
  10. Career goal changed
  11. Religious orientation was challenged
  12. Became more tolerant of other colors, races, creeds, ethnicity
  13. Improved in interpersonal skills
  14. Participating in a club or on a team was good for me
  15. Had positive feelings about first semester
  16. Felt isolated and alone as a minority student
  17. Studied more than 15 hours a week
  18. I did not know how to study
  19. Changed my major
  20. Felt my personal values were challenged
  21. My values became more liberal
  22. Dated a lot
  23. Travel, fun, and cultural activities interfered with academic work
  24. Had financial trouble
  25. Worried about getting good grades
  26. Became homesick
  27. The most important person was my closest friend
  28. The academic experience was exciting and challenging
  29. Self-concept changed for the better
  30. More tolerant of persons with different sexual orientations
  31. Caused me to now think differently about male and female roles
  32. Sought counseling
  33. Abused alcohol
  34. Experienced stress related to health problems
  35. Experienced sexual harassment
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## Procedure

In order to identify participants and gather data, OIE identified 46 registered study abroad students at the Preparation and Experienced stages who could be contacted. Each of the students at the home campus was invited to attend stage-specific focus group sessions to complete the questionnaire and to talk about the impacts of the experience on his or her life. Those who did not attend, in addition to those who were in the Abroad Stage, were invited to submit written responses.

For each issue, the frequency of Experienced and Preparing students “True,” “False,” and “Not Applicable” responses was recorded for “first semester USA” and for “first semester study abroad.” True frequencies were translated into percents, and the differences between “first semester USA” and “first semester study abroad” were calculated for each group on each issue.

## Limitations

Even though all of the Experienced students were from the same home institution, it should be noted that not every participating Experienced student had identical study abroad opportunities, since not all of the 24 students studied in the same or similar countries, cultures, and institutions. Also, the level of student ability to recall their first semesters would not be constant since differing amounts of time had lapsed. Furthermore, the number of both Experienced and Preparing students was small, so statistical analysis on 32 sets of responses would not be strongly reliable.

## Results

Written format responses were generated by 34 of the 46 students, yielding a response rate of 74% (see Table 2, Response Rate). Of the 34 responses, two were not usable, yielding a composite response rate of 69%.

TABLE 2

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### Response Rate

Respondents at Each Stage	Total (Rate)
Preparation students (n=10)	9 (90%)
Abroad students (n=7)	7 (100%)
Return students (n=8)	4 (50%)
Removed students (n=21)	14 (67%)
Total students (N=46)	34 (74%)

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The issue/item differences between each first semester USA “True” percent and the corresponding first semester abroad “True” percent are illustrated in Table 3. The numeric equation in each cell represents the following formula: “True Percent First Semester USA” minus “True Percent First Semester Abroad” equals “Difference Percentage.”

The reader should note that Table 3 has three large areas delineated by dark, horizontal lines. The top area identifies issues that were truer for the students for their first semester USA. The middle area identifies issues that were no truer for their first semester USA than for their first semester abroad. The bottom area identifies issues that were truer for the students in their first semester abroad. Each large area is sub-divided by differences of ten (0-10, 1-20, etc.).

Also illustrated, juxtaposition, are the “True” percent differences (anticipations) of Preparation students (right hand column) and the “True” percent differences identified by the Experienced students (middle column). The closer these two values are for a given issue, the more accurate the Preparation students’ anticipation was of the transition to the first semester of study abroad.

TABLE 3

**Comparisons of USA to Abroad Transitions, and Experienced Student Transitions to Preparation Student Anticipated Transitions**

Issues	24 Experienced Students	8 Preparing Students
	Truer 1st Semester USA	<u>Anticipations</u>
19. Changed my major	33.34	62.50
18. I did not know how to study	29.17	25.00
25. Worried about getting good grades	25.00	-25.00
10. Career goal changed	16.67	50.00
33. Abused alcohol	16.67	0
2. My family was supportive	8.34	12.5
9. Had a helpful academic advisor	8.33	50.00
17. Studied more than 15 hours a week	8.33	-37.5

Issues	No Truer 1st Semester USA than 1st Semester Abroad	<u>Anticipations</u>
6. Experienced shaken academic confidence	0	0
11. Religious orientation was challenged	0	0
14. Participating in a club or on a team was good for me	0	-25.00
32. Sought counseling	0	12.50
34. Experienced stress related to health problems	0	12.50

TABLE 3 (CONT.)

Issues	24 Experienced Students	8 Preparing Students
	Truer 1st Semester Abroad	Anticipations
4. No one seemed to care	-4.17	-12.50
20. Felt my personal values were challenged	-4.17	-37.50
22. Dated a lot	-12.50	0
1. Worried about finding new friends	-12.50	-37.50
7. Did not study enough	-16.66	-12.50
3. Experienced loneliness	-16.67	0
16. Felt isolated and alone as a minority student	-16.67	-12.50
21. My values became more liberal	-16.67	0
15. Had positive feelings about first semester	-20.83	0
27. The most important person was my closest friend	-20.83	12.50
5. Had a different initial adjustment	-20.84	-62.50
30. More tolerant of persons with different sexual orientations	-24.75	-24.75
23. Travel, fun, and cultural activities interfered with academic work	-25.00	-37.50
29. Self concept changed for the better	-25.00	-12.50
35. Experienced sexual harassment	-25.00	0
24. Had financial trouble	-29.16	0
26. Became homesick	-29.17	-50.00
28. The academic experience was exciting and challenging	-29.41	37.50
12. Became more tolerant of other colors, races, creeds, ethnicity	-33.34	-25.00
13. Improved in interpersonal skills	-33.57	-12.50
31. Caused me to now think differently about male and female roles	-54.17	-25.00
8. Trouble adjusting to a larger class size	-62.50	0

## Discussion

### Student Development Issues

When considering a detailed analysis of this transition, student maturation must be considered. Theory and research indicate that some students struggle during the first year of collegiate study (Borland, 1998). For successful students, such challenges lead to learning and human development that are foundational for the ability to respond to subsequent issues (Evans, Foreny, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Therefore, study abroad students (typically, beyond their first semester USA) should have mastered some development issues and would, therefore, be more prepared for

various student issues at the start of a first semester abroad. For example, one would expect the challenge of learning how to study (academic skill development, issue 24) to be less true in the first semester abroad. Students generally should be better prepared for self-concept improvement (issue 35) after the first freshman semester in college. One must consider this data when comparing transition issues between first-semester USA students and later-semester study abroad students.

## Study Abroad Issues

Experienced students reported no-difference or limited (+20 to -20%) differences between experiences relating to 18 issues. However, within this range (-12.5 to -16.67%), there are indications of concern about six social, academic, and value adjustments before students begin their study abroad experiences.

Within the -20.83 to -62.5% range, 14 issue differences were identified as being truer of the first semester abroad. Of the 14 issues in this range, six are typically considered negative transition and total experience outcomes while seven are typically considered positive. The six issues that are typically considered negative outcomes of transitions were: (a) adjustment difficulty, (b) interference with academic work, (c) sexual harassment, (d) financial trouble, (e) homesickness, and (f) trouble adjusting to larger classes. The seven issues that are typically considered positive outcomes of transitions were: (a) general positive feelings about school, (b) increased tolerance of others, (c) tolerances of differences, (d) improved self-concept, (e) improved interpersonal skills, (f) improved sexual role identity, and (g) a perceived challenging academic experience. The 14th issue, "the most important person was my closest friend," cannot be classified as either positive or negative without a qualitative investigation.

## Anticipation of Experience vs. the Experience

The Preparation students who anticipated their own first semester abroad experience responded antithetically to how Experienced students responded on 14 of the 35 issues. They were not able to accurately anticipate the impact of the study abroad experience as reported by the Experienced students. One possible explanation is that this was a result of their level of knowledge and orientation to-date. Another suggestion is that the study abroad student has idealistic notions about the transition to another country, and that these are not always realistic.

## Implications

There are implications for further research on this issue and with a larger sample. However, this study illustrates transition experiences of study abroad students to which professionals can be alerted. The professional will thus have the tools to develop appropriate orientation programs to address these anticipated transition issues.

The major implication of this research is twofold. First, Preparation students lack an

accurate anticipation of the study abroad transition experience and need to be better informed. This would indicate a need for stronger interaction between Experienced students and Preparation students, as well as appropriate preparation stage educational programming.

Second, students who are in the challenges of a study abroad transition and experience face some issues that are more challenging than those of their first semester of study USA. Perhaps, study abroad programs need to develop student support systems akin to those of freshman year programs. These students also need to learn how to maximize the positive outcomes available to them through a study abroad experience.

These educational opportunities and support services should clearly address the issues that are more challenging within study abroad transition and experiences than they were during study in the USA. The professional's goal should be to help these students learn and develop through their encounters with these parallel issues in the study abroad transition and experience.

The American study abroad student faces a major transition for which there are parallels with the first semester of college in the USA transitions. These parallels (and distinctions) merit the attention of students and the orientation-transition professionals who support them.

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