Fostering Global Citizens Through Study Abroad—
A Case Study*

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In today’s increasingly globalized world, study abroad programs are receiving unprecedented attention as a significant part of international education. The mission of Soka University of America (SUA) is in line with the trend of producing U.S. graduates in higher education who demonstrate intercultural and international competence. SUA has joined the academic world in this growing area of interest and requires all its students to study abroad. Learning from other institutions and exploring its own path, SUA has developed a comprehensive study abroad program that seamlessly integrated in the liberal arts curricular of the university, which positively affected foreign language learning, improved students’ abilities to function as global citizens, and opened various opportunities worldwide for the students. To insure students’ study abroad experiences fruitful, the following aspects need to be considered: 1. systematic institutional support; 2. designated staff to work on study abroad affairs; 3. advising students about the courses to take while abroad; 4. students need support from the entire home institution; and 5. connect study abroad with a given institution’s broader goals.

Keywords: study abroad, intercultural communication, intercultural competence, fostering global citizens

In today’s increasingly globalized world, study abroad programs are receiving unprecedented attention as a significant part of international education. Studying abroad is a growing and important aspect of U.S. undergraduate education and can be traced back for a long time (Hoffa, 2007). Since the turn of the 21st century, the number of American undergraduate students studying abroad has grown steadily. It has not, however, increased as fast as expected. Figure 1 shows that the number of American students studying abroad has more than doubled since 1998, but this figure is not even one third of an ambitious plan by Senator Paul Simon, whose Study Abroad Foundation Act proposes to send 1,000,000 students abroad by 2020 (Association of International Educators [NAFSA], 2016).

The mission of Soka University of America (SUA) is in line with the trend of producing U.S. graduates in higher education who demonstrate intercultural and international competence. Intercultural communication is important today because countries in the world become closely related to each other due to the development of technologies, trades, tourisms and conflicts. To develop intercultural competence, the capability to shift cultural perspective and appropriately adapt behavior to cultural differences and commonalities, has become a consensus in the institutions of higher education in the world.

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Intercultural competence is particularly important for SUA since its mission is “to foster a steady stream of global citizens committed to living a contributive life” (SUA, 2019, p. 5). Apparently, the ability to conduct positive intercultural communication is a basic requirement for a global citizen. Although there are other ways of developing this ability, the founding faculty and administrators consider study abroad is the best way they should make available for all of their students.

![American Students Abroad](image)

*Figure 1. Number of American students studying abroad (Source: U.S. Falls Short in Studying Abroad, Bidwell, 2014).*

**A Liberal Arts Curriculum**

The degree offered at SUA is a BA in liberal arts, with concentrations in environmental studies, humanities, international studies, and social and behavioral sciences. Study abroad is an integrated part of the general education curriculum and a channel to foster students who are able to interact with and appreciate other cultures and traditions; and take constructive action for a better society.

In Language and Cultural Program, the learning outcomes are to help students reach the linguistic proficiency and cross-cultural awareness and understanding so as to successfully go on study abroad for a semester in their junior year. During this semester, they are expected to take 12 credits worth of language courses in the target language. Although research shows that any short-term international exposure can have a great impact on students’ intercultural competence as long as they have been prepared well (Jackson, 2010), SUA considers one semester most effective.

Of the 120 course units required for graduation, 12 have to be earned from study abroad. To create as many opportunities as possible for students, SUA outsources its overseas programs. Fortunately, by the time when SUA was founded there were quite a few experienced providers who had been in operation for years. Currently, students can choose from 13 countries, 28 cities, and more than 30 programs.

**A Complete Cycle of Healthy Performance**

Study abroad has become an integrated part of the SUA curriculum just like all the other required courses that a student must successfully complete in order to graduate. It has also become a characteristic that distinguishes SUA from other institutions of higher education. When students decide to submit their college
applications to SUA, they know that study abroad is required and they will have to be prepared to study abroad during junior year, and this awareness has an impact on student attitude and conduct: (a) SUA students connect foreign language study with their long-term goals related to a job, graduate study, or social service work; (b) they take their foreign language studies seriously, knowing they will need these skills to survive and succeed while studying abroad in the near future; and (c) their choices when it comes to roommates and attention to international affairs are also affected by the language they are learning. As a result, foreign language instructors are able to allocate more energy to enhancing the educational experience by shifting away from maintaining classroom order or motivating students. All the adjunct faculty members who have taught at colleges and universities outside of SUA have made comments to this effect.

Since study abroad is part of the curriculum that involves every student, it involves every aspect of the university’s operation. The Study Abroad Office is responsible to coordinate various offices and departments. It also organizes activities for students all year round. Some events, such as pre-study abroad orientations and the orientations for returnees, are for particular groups of students. Others, such as Study Abroad Fairs are for all students. Although students are eligible to study abroad during junior year, orientations begin in sophomore year to get them started in thinking about relevant concepts and topics. SUA encourages its students to explore the many possibilities on their own. The Study Abroad (SA) Office facilitates a lot of logistic matters, such as helping students with applying for visas and purchasing airplane tickets. The director of the Study Abroad Office meets with all students who are going to study abroad individually to discuss issues and concerns with them. During pre-departure orientations, student representatives who have returned from studying abroad are invited to share their experiences and insights. Before their departures, students obtain information about studying abroad through the Internet, orientations, the Study Abroad Office, and individual returnees. All these activities help them form a proactive attitude toward study abroad.

Although students have done a lot of preparation with the help of the home institution, most of them still experience cultural shock when they actually in the foreign countries. This fact alone indicates the importance of study abroad. One could never fully understand a culture without being there. After initial excitement, students start to feel the pressure of speaking foreign language, non-familiar way of interaction in day-to-day life with their roommates or host families. Some feel that their roommates do not respect their privacy and want to control their activities; some feel that host families do not understand their struggles and do not really care about their health in terms of food preparation; some are really upset when their friends do not show up at appointments. … Language pledge could be very hard to bear as well, plus unfamiliar food, problematic living condition. Information, emotion, friendship, and frustration come to them at the same time and made them feel overwhelmed. It is in the process of overcoming the obstacles and facing the challenges that they grow stronger, more mature, and better at intercultural communication. They often do more than learning the languages. They attend conferences, participate in volunteer works, club activities, bands, etc. trying to know more local people and make contributions to the local communities. They become increasingly comfortable linguistically and culturally to interact with the local people. Most Japanese students who chose to study Chinese have the intention to contribute to the friendship and understanding between these two countries. They were treated differently; however, depend on the political climates when they happened to be in China. Some students were insulted face to face by Chinese youth, some parents of their Chinese roommates strongly objected their children to share dorm rooms with Japanese students. Although these students were scared, they still worked
very hard to learn Chinese and eventually earned the trust of those parents by communicating with them in Chinese. One father told our students, “You changed my impressions on Japanese people. I hope all young Japanese are like you”.

Students usually undergo great changes during the semester abroad, and such growth often exceeds their own expectations. They are usually excited and want to share with others what they have learned and incorporate these lessons into their schoolwork and beyond. Unlike many other institutions where only the language teachers and study abroad administrators care about what returnees have experienced and learned overseas, SUA as a whole greatly values and respects the experiences and insights students have obtained while out of country. Since all students are required to study abroad, there is never a shortage of curiosity about or interest in a given student’s overseas experiences in the SUA community. They are warmly welcomed back to the home campus and asked to share their impressions with other students during the official reentry orientation hosted by the SA Office. Returning students are admired as they speak fluently in target languages with SUA teachers and their peers who have yet to travel internationally. Students who are preparing to study abroad often ask for their opinions on certain programs and tips on how to deal with various situations that may arise. By sharing their newly acquired knowledge, returnees positively contribute to the school and its community. This, in turn, encourages them to maintain and advance their language skills. Not all study abroad experiences are pleasant, but this does not mean that the takeaway lessons have to be negative. In fact, as H. Moon pointed out, Student Affairs invests time in counseling to turn such negative associations into points of encouragement (Personal communication, January 26, 2016).

**Outcomes of Study Abroad**

SUA adopted the Standards-based Measurement of Proficiency (STAMP) test for our target languages in 2007 to assess our students’ language skills. We administer the tests before and after a student’s semester abroad. The pre-study abroad test results are used to help students choose the courses they will take while overseas. When SUA students return from the semester abroad, they take the appropriate STAMP test again as part of the pre- and post- evaluation.

| Table 1 |

| 2013-2017 STAMP Pre- and Post- Test Analysis (All Languages Combined) |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                 | Mean | N | Std. deviation | Std. error mean |
| Reading Pre-SA  | 5.44 | 417 | 1.644          | 0.081           |
| Reading Post-SA | 5.88 | 417 | 1.607          | 0.079           |
| Writing Pre-SA  | 4.64 | 413 | 0.936          | 0.046           |
| Writing Post-SA | 4.85 | 413 | 1.118          | 0.055           |
| Listening Pre-SA| 4.03 | 417 | 1.607          | 0.079           |
| Listening Post-SA| 4.90 | 417 | 1.666          | 0.082           |
| Speaking Pre-SA | 4.13 | 404 | 1.152          | 0.057           |
| Speaking Post-SA| 4.57 | 404 | 1.217          | 0.061           |

Note. Adopted from “Global Learning at SUA” (Ishiyama, 2018).

All pair-wise comparisons were found to be significantly different at $p = 0.001$ level. In other words, overall, students improved their language proficiency in each of the four areas (i.e., reading, writing, listening, and speaking).
Each individual language that was tested (i.e., Chinese, French, Japanese, and Spanish) also showed the same results. The test results show that the language skills of SUA students have consistently improved.

When students come back from studying abroad, they take a survey to summarize their oversea experience that collects their thoughts on their personal gains, growth, comments, complaints, and advice to future study abroad students. Since we did not set up specific criteria to measure students’ global competence, the author borrowed a list of common traits for global citizen from Donatelli, Yngve, Miller, and Ellis (2005, p. 134) and modified it to reflect the data we collected. Since the SUA survey asks open-ended questions, students can say whatever they think is relevant. Some answers are really long and some are short. The author went over the answers of 53 study abroad returnees from 2014 and categorized all the relevant information. Although far from thorough, it provides a rough sketch of global competence.

By no means does Figure 2 represent a comprehensive overview of the traits returning SUA students may have gained, because only a small sample size has been charted. In addition, the survey questions were not designed to fit these categories. However, we can still see that the majority of students in the sample who studied abroad do possess these basic traits as global citizens, and they attribute their growth in this sense to their overseas experiences. Many say that studying abroad is a life-changing experience. Returnees have learned and grown so much that they deeply appreciate the opportunity.

**Students’ Experiences and Comments**

**Corina**

She is a second-generation Mexican American immigrant who is fluent in both English and Spanish. Corina chose to learn Chinese, thinking it would be really cool to be able to communicate with people around the globe and become a bridge to world peace. But learning Chinese was so hard and time-consuming
that she became completely overwhelmed. There was always a new obstacle once she overcame the current one, and there was always new vocabulary and grammar to learn once she had mastered a given topic. She thought of quitting after the first year, but she kept trying with the encouragement of her classmates and teachers. Determined to win the battle of learning Chinese, she selected the toughest study abroad program in northeast China. When she was under a great pressure during study abroad, she cried and asked herself, “Why have I acted against myself when there were other programs to choose from? Have I not struggled enough?”

It was through this prolonged struggle and effort that her Chinese skills improved. Corina spoke local Chinese fluently by the middle of her semester abroad and received the award for “most improved student” at the end of the program. She learned a lot and was inspired by her course about traditional Chinese medicine. Corina ended up applying for and being accepted by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. Looking back, she is filled with appreciation. Not only did she improve her Chinese language skills, but she also found direction for her future by studying abroad.

**Luisa**

She studied abroad in Dakar, Senegal, and interned for a branch of point d’accueil pour réfugiés et immigrants (PARI), which helps refugees and immigrants. The internship was very meaningful to her, because both of her parents are immigrants from Guatemala and now live in the United States. Thus, Luisa thought PARI would be a great organization to work at. They focus on helping refugees and immigrants who come to Senegal from many different countries in Africa. Whether these people leave because of war or economic crises, Caritas Senegal, the organization PARI is a part of, does its best to help those in need. Luisa’s job included welcoming any refugees and immigrants that came to the office. Then she and her coworkers would listen to their stories and write them down. She used Excel files to organize their data, and on Fridays there were committee meetings to decide whether a person would receive aid. It was stressful at times, because Luisa felt she had too much responsibility as the only foreign intern. This was especially true when she thought about how she was a part of something that could dramatically affect a person’s life. She feared that her French was not advanced enough to properly share her opinions, but her fellow interns were patient and valued her opinion. Luisa loved her internship and believes it gave her the opportunity to make a positive impact on other people’s lives.

**Scott**

The most meaningful experience Scott had in Peru was the time he spent volunteering at a shelter for girls in the province of Cusco. Before leaving for the official program trip to Cusco, Scott had decided to extend his stay at the last minute so that he could spend time at the shelter in Pampamarca, which is a small rural town three hours away from the city of Cusco. He traveled there with four other students from his program and was intimidated by the 25 small girls he met there between the ages of four and 15 years. As each day passed, he could sense that they were beginning to open up to him and his peers, because everyone was bonding by playing volleyball for hours. The volunteer work consisted of teaching English and doing workshops with the girls to build up their sense of dignity. The girls were split into two groups: one for older girls and one for the younger girls. Although Scott only stayed a mere five days, he felt deep compassion and appreciation for the girls he met, because they were so energetic and kind to him. After traveling back to Lima and finishing the rest
of the university semester, he eventually returned to Pampamarca to give the shelter a new volleyball net as a small token of his appreciation for the unforgettable experience he had with them.

Nowadays, SUA graduates have spread in many countries in the world trying to live a contributive life. Thirty-nine percent of them pursued education after SUA in dozens of disciplines, such as MA and Ph.D. in Economics, Education, Global Leadership, Foreign languages, Conflict analysis and resolution, Political science, Engineering, Law, Juris Doctor Law, Medicine, etc. Sixty-four percent reported with jobs in education, environment, Government, healthcare, international development, journalism, law, media, medicine, translation, etc. Thirty-eight percent reported to be living in international settings outside of U.S. doing their part to contribute to society.

Concluding Remarks: The Implications

SUA has been able to take advantage of the experiences of other institutions across the country and mature providers abroad in building their own study abroad program. Being a new school, SUA designed its study abroad program as an integrated part of its core curriculum. Although a small liberal arts college, the institution’s relatively large endowment has been used to subsidize study abroad. All of these factors make SUA a rather unique case. So, how does SUA’s experience with study abroad relate to other institutions’ experiences? Since we are all in the study abroad industry, we all have the essential task of turning fresh high school graduates into citizens who demonstrate intercultural and international competence. This must be done in a limited period, so we all follow similar processes and face comparable challenges. Thus, there must be something that SUA can contribute to our common cause.

First, systematic institutional support is a significant factor in a study abroad program’s survival and is needed for it to thrive. “It takes a village to raise a child”, and it takes a whole school community to maintain a strong study abroad program. If we make study abroad everybody’s business, then it is easier to facilitate the process of overseas study. Second, it is necessary to have designated staff to work on study abroad affairs. Studying abroad involves many aspects of college life and also requires careful communication with international institutions to be successful. Furthermore, it is a growing field. Therefore, having only a couple of faculty members in charge of both teaching and administrative work produces a very short-sighted and ineffective model. Third, students should be given advice about what courses to take while abroad. Many SUA students have reported that courses taught in English in non-English speaking countries are of low quality. We should be working to encourage students to take courses that really benefit them. Fourth, while study abroad students need support from the entire home institution, they can also positively contribute to the international education climate at the home school as well. Their experiences may help students who are not able to participate in overseas study by opening their eyes and minds. Fifth, a study abroad program should be connected with a given institution’s broader goals. Seeing the big picture will help presidents and deans at the higher education level make decisions that benefit both those participating in study abroad and the school community in general.

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