

# Global Learning through Short-Term Study Abroad

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Short-term study abroad experiences—those in which students are engaged for fewer than eight weeks—are the most common type of undergraduate study abroad in the United States. According to the Institute of International Education’s 2008 Open Doors report, more than half of all American students who studied abroad in the 2006–07 academic year (55.4 percent) participated in short-term programs. Short-term programs are increasing in popularity for many reasons: they are generally more affordable than longer programs, they appeal to students who might not be able or willing to commit to a semester or a year abroad, and they allow students in structured academic programs like engineering, nursing, and education to study abroad without falling behind in their programs. But because widespread participation in short-term study abroad programs is a relatively new phenomenon—(during the 1996–97 academic year, only 3.3 percent of students studying abroad participated in short-term programs)—there is little formal research describing either the best practices for short-term study abroad or the learning outcomes that can accompany it.

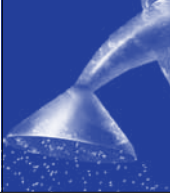
## DEFINING AND DEFENDING SHORT-TERM STUDY ABROAD

While nearly all institutions define short-term study abroad as programs that last less than a semester or quarter, there is a great deal of variation within the short-term category. Short-term programs can range from weeklong programs conducted during spring break in conjunction with a single course, to three- or four-week programs conducted during January term or in the summer, to longer programs of up to eight weeks that can involve homestays, travel to multiple sites, and service or research experiences. Many short-term programs include several or many of these elements. There is no “average” short-term study abroad program; the variations are as numerous as the institutions that host them.

For the majority of the twentieth century, students who studied abroad were from wealthy families who could afford to send those young adults to study foreign languages or the humanities in European capital cities (Lewin 2009, xiv; Dessoiff 2006, 22). The explosion of globalization at the end of the twentieth century helped encourage greater numbers of students from more diverse backgrounds and fields of study to go abroad. However, not all of them desired or were able to dedicate a year or even a semester to an in-depth experience abroad, and institutions—and for-profit companies—began offering shorter-term programs that appealed to greater numbers of students. But because longer-term programs had been the norm for so many years, short-term study abroad has suffered an often unjustified reputation problem.

“Short-terms have kind of been the stepchild of study abroad,” says Lisa Chieffo, associate director of the University of Delaware’s Center for International Studies. “They were initially often summer programs with a ‘vacation-y’ image. And a lot of purists don’t believe a month is a long enough time for a significant experience abroad. All this is even more reason that institutions must have strong academic foundations for their short-term programs.” Sarah Spencer, director of short-term programs at the University of St. Thomas, says something as simple as how institutions frame their short-term programs can go a long way toward helping counter the stereotypes. “Avoid two four-letter words: trip and tour,” she recommends. “A trip is a one-time, isolated thing. A good short-term program is strongly connected to coursework and an integral part of a larger learning experience.”

Though many faculty members still feel that “longer is better” when it comes to study abroad, at least one study has found evidence that duration of stay is insignificant in terms of the degree to which students who study abroad are globally engaged. A 2009 study from the University of Minnesota (Paige et al. 2009)



surveyed more than six thousand alumni from twenty universities who had participated in study abroad over a period of fifty years. The study found no significant difference in global engagement—defined for the study as degree of international and domestic civic commitment and volunteerism—between students who had studied abroad for longer and shorter time periods. Most of the respondents, however, reported their global engagement stemmed from their time abroad. “Certainly there is a strong value in being in a place for a long time,” says Eric Lund, director of international and off-campus studies at St. Olaf College. “But this move to short-term programs is expanding the number of students who can gain from studying abroad, and I think that’s a very positive thing.”

### MAKING THE MOST OF THE EXPERIENCE

Faculty members and program directors agree that when working with a short time frame for study abroad, preparation is tantamount to success, both for the students and for the faculty member leading the group. Nearly all short-term programs are faculty-led, rather than exchanges with foreign institutions, and this setup provides many built-in benefits, explains Andreas Sobisch, director of the Center for Global Education at John Carroll University. Faculty members have a much larger degree of control over the program, and are able to ensure that the program activities are closely integrated with the content of the students’ coursework back home. “When I teach a short-term program for ten, fifteen, or thirty days, I can really control the content of that program,” Sobisch says. “I love longer programs for the immersion, but many students in longer programs don’t use their time abroad wisely in an academic sense—they hang around with all American students and travel for fun. In a short program, I can model for the students how to continually process what they are learning.”

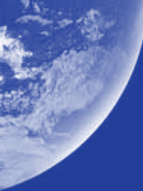
One common format for short-term programs is the January or winter-term course. Many institutions offer a winter term of approximately one month, and this time period offers an ideal opportunity for students who cannot travel abroad for a longer time to experience international education. The University of Delaware (UD) focuses on winter term with its study abroad offerings—the university has had a winter term since the late 1970s, and is offering about seventy study abroad options for winter term 2010. About 40 percent of UD students study abroad, and of that number, about 90 percent participate in short-term programs. Winter-term programs at UD typically require students to enroll in six credits of academic work that is connected to the study site, as well as a zero-credit pass/fail course that requires students to reflect upon their international experiences. Students in UD’s winter term Materials Science/Engineering program in France, for example, enroll in Topics in Modern European History: French History, and Materials Science

for Engineers. While abroad, they study at scientific research centers and visit universities in several French cities. At the University of St. Thomas, students in the January term course Theological Reflection: AIDS, Apartheid, and the Arts of Resistance travel to Gugulethu, Cape Town, South Africa, for a program offered by the theology department. Students study the theological dimension of how art, music, and film functioned during apartheid (and today) to resist oppression and stigmatization, while also completing service-learning projects through a partnership between the college and a charity in South Africa. “This program hits all the things that are so powerful about short-term study abroad,” Spencer explains. “It’s only three weeks, but these students really get to know South Africans and contribute to the community there.” Students who participate in one winter-term program often participate again in later years and are able to draw connections between the experiences, Lund says. He has had students participate in a winter-term course

### Five Best Practices for Short-Term Study Abroad Programs

1. **Start with strong, clear academic content.** Answer the question, Why is it important to teach this course abroad? Make sure the learning objectives and the site itself are closely integrated. Make sure all short-term programs are connected to an academic course and are at least as rigorous as those taught on the home campus.
2. **Make certain faculty are comfortable and competent with experiential teaching.** A faculty member might give brilliant lectures, but can he or she teach experientially, integrating the unique features of the site abroad to ensure students make connections and have authentic learning experiences?
3. **Ensure integration with the local community.** Professors and students should not simply go from classroom to hotel to site visits on a chartered bus. Students tend to learn best in programs where there is some sort of service or experiential learning project that puts them in contact with the host community.
4. **Bring in lecturers from the host country.** Professors and academic experts from host country institutions provide perspectives students’ regular professors cannot provide.
5. **Require ongoing reflection for both individual students and the group as a whole.** Students should keep structured journals of their study abroad experience, using guided reflection practices to help them process and understand their experiences. The group should regularly engage in structured discussion.

Sources: Sarah Spencer, director of short-term programs, University of St. Thomas, and coeditor, *The Guide to Successful Short-Term Programs Abroad* (2002); and Lisa Chieffo, associate director, Center for International Studies, University of Delaware



on colonial influences and indigenous people in South Africa, and then later investigate the same themes in Australia during a different program.

Summer programs offer similar options for in-depth study. In the Maricopa Community College system, summer programs ranging in length from one week to one month are offered at five system colleges. Education students at Mesa Community College can enroll in a month-long program of experiential learning in Xalapa, Mexico, that includes field experience working in Mexican classrooms and seven academic credits in education and Spanish. Chandler-Gilbert Community College offers a ten-day Bridge to Belize program focusing on environmental ethics and philosophy. The University of Connecticut's Liverpool

program is a three-week summer study abroad experience that specifically targets first-generation and minority college students. The students take a three-credit course at the University of Liverpool on the historical and modern effects of the transatlantic slave trade, travel to historic sites around England, and complete a three-credit independent research project with UConn faculty members upon their return.

A third option for short-term programs are those in which the international experience is part of a larger, semester-long academic course. At John Carroll University, Sobisch coteaches a spring semester political science/history class with a colleague. The course, *Berlin: From Reich to Republic*, includes a weeklong study trip to Berlin during John Carroll's

spring break. "This class is my ideal of how short-term study abroad can really work," Sobisch says. "We have class for seven weeks before the trip, and the students have to keep a journal every day that they are abroad. When they're back, they write a research paper on one of the themes of the course. Many students continue with these themes and eventually expand their papers into senior theses."

Short-term domestic study-away programs, though not common, provide a cost-effective option for students who cannot afford international airfare but still want the educational benefits of learning out of their element. At Susquehanna University, which began requiring an international or domestic study-away experience for all students in fall 2009, students can enroll in a two-credit biology course, *Topics in Biology: Disaster Impacts in Society—Hurricane Katrina*, which dovetails with Susquehanna's frequent Hurricane Relief Team trips to New Orleans. These trips to New Orleans, when taken with the academic course, satisfy the university's study away requirement.

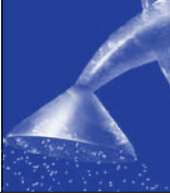
## Where and What Are Students Studying Abroad?

A few of the short-term study abroad programs offered in the 2008-09 and 2009-10 academic years:

- **Antarctica**—Humans and the Environment (Virginia Tech, fall semester and winter break 2009)
- **Australia**—Contemporary Australia (Arcadia University, winter term 2010)
- **Czech Republic**—Study of Central Europe (Valdosta State University, spring intersession 2009)
- **England**—Arts of Medieval and Renaissance Britain (Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, spring semester and spring break 2010)
- **Finland**—International Perspectives in Recreation and Health (Ithaca College, summer 2009)
- **Ireland**—Schooling in a Democratic Society (Kent State University, spring intersession 2010)
- **Israel**—Archaeological Field Work in Apollonia-Arsuf (Brown University, summer 2009)
- **Kenya**—Primateology and Conservation Biology (Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, summer 2010)
- **Mexico**—Cattle Production, Processing, and Marketing in Northern Mexico (Kansas State University, spring break 2010)
- **Panama**—Tropical Plant Systematics (Ohio University, winter intersession 2010)
- **Poland**—Krakow Summer Engineering Program (San Diego State University, summer 2009)
- **Spain**—Astronomy and Spanish in Granada (Goucher College, summer 2010)
- **Tanzania**—Swahili (Howard University, summer 2009)

## WHAT WORKS FOR STUDENTS?

Faculty members and study abroad administrators and program directors tend to agree that students get the most out of short-term programs that are highly structured, require ongoing reflection, and include in-depth experience working or studying with host country participants. Universities and colleges should also strive to offer all or at least most of their short-term programs internally, rather than relying on external service providers, many of which offer academically weak programs that are more focused on tourism. As short-term study abroad becomes more popular, institutions are standardizing the way in which these programs are developed, approved, and carried out, rather than simply allowing



an individual faculty member to gather students, collect checks, and take a study tour in Spain or England, as was often the case in the past.

Within the Maricopa Community College system's extensive study abroad program, new options must be approved through a process that involves a preprogram site assessment, a detailed written application, and ultimately approval by both the individual college and the system's office of international education. "All travel and study abroad options have to be connected to an approved course that's in the course bank, and they must equal or surpass the quality of a course offered on campus," explains Kathryn Howard, program coordinator for the Department of International and Intercultural Education for Maricopa Community Colleges. "Faculty have to submit a detailed justification for the site they're proposing. Just studying abroad because it's interesting wouldn't be approved." In their proposals, faculty members must document how each contact hour for the course would be earned and which competencies the program would fulfill. "Going to a museum abroad is educational, but there must also be a presentation, discussion, something like that," Howard says. "Every activity must be closely tied to what students are learning in the classroom."

Some program directors also recommend limiting the number of sites visited to one or two, rather than trying to visit many countries within a three- or four-week program. "If you are staying in one or two places, students are able to become more deeply involved with the content," says University of Delaware's Lisa Chieffo. "Students have fewer authentic experiences when they're spending so much time travelling around." Spending the entire program in one locale also can allow students to interact more authentically with host country residents, whether in the classroom, in service programs, or in

short-term homestays. Mesa Community College's month-long Guanajuato, Mexico, program places students with Mexican families, where they experience immersion into the Spanish language and explore the cultural highlights of Guanajuato, including art galleries, museums, and archeological sites along with two credit-bearing classes. They become, in effect, residents of the city for a month.

The most important aspect of planning a short-term study abroad program is ensuring that participants avoid the "island" or "bubble" effect, says Sarah Spencer, of the University of St. Thomas. Programs abroad that mostly involve traveling by coach between historic sites may allow students to see a greater amount of the host country, but offer much less in terms of engaging educational experiences. "In some programs, the only local residents the students get to know are the bus driver and the guide," Spencer says. "Even in a short, non-language-focused program, students need to know the basic polite phrases in the local language and have contact with local people in and out of the classroom."

### REENTRY FOR RETURNING STUDENTS

Reentry programming for returning students is also increasingly a feature of short-term study abroad programs, though it is still used much less frequently than in long-term programs. Most often, institutions have "study abroad ambassadors" or peer counselor groups made up of returning study abroad students who discuss their experiences with prospective students and give advice. Professors can also hold meetings to reunite a study group, discuss current events and news from the host country, and help students draw connections with any future study abroad programs they are planning. At St. Olaf College, a weekly World Issues Dialogue draws students from across

campus—study abroad alumni and not—to meet for dinner and discussion. Conversation tables, available at most institutions, are especially beneficial for foreign language students who want to practice their speaking skills. Ideally, says John Carroll University's Andreas Sobisch, institutions might have study abroad students enroll in a one-credit class to prepare for a short-term program, and then require a one-credit follow-up course the following semester in which students would produce a paper, presentation, or capstone project about the experience.

While short-term study abroad may be replacing semester and year programs as the norm on college campuses nationwide, it is important to remember that only about 2.1 percent of all American college students participate in a study abroad program of any length. Institutions must continue to develop programs that are appealing and accessible to a broad range of students, including those who have traditionally been overlooked by study abroad offices. Significant progress has already taken place in this area, but program directors agree there is much room for growth. "Not everyone can study abroad," says Sobisch. "But well-designed short-term programs definitely provide the opportunity to a larger number." ■

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