2016

Why a Short-Term Study Abroad?

Mary Granger Dr
The George Washington University, granger@gwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://aisel.aisnet.org/siged2016

Recommended Citation
Granger, Mary Dr, "Why a Short-Term Study Abroad?" (2016). 2016 Proceedings. 17.
http://aisel.aisnet.org/siged2016/17
WHY A SHORT-TERM STUDY ABROAD?

Dr. Mary Granger  
School of Business, Information Systems & Technology Mgmt.  
The George Washington University  
granger@gwu.edu

Abstract:
Current graduate students in a business school are often expected to be the future business leaders in a global environment. Universities are able to facilitate a global awareness by offering short-term study abroad courses. Graduate students often cannot leave their workplace or families for the extended study abroad semester, and the short-term abroad appears to fit their life-style. This paper describes a short-term study abroad concentrating on Technology and Innovation in a developing country. While this is only one class, offered three consecutive years, there are some lessons learned. It is recognized that the impact on learning needs more attention and research to convince faculty and universities that the endeavor is able to benefit graduate students in their careers.

Keywords: Short-Term Study Abroad, Innovation, Technology, Graduate Students, Global, International

I. Introduction
Why should faculty invest the time and effort into creating and leading a Short-Term Study Abroad class? Do the students benefit? Does the faculty member benefit? Is it seen as a 'boondoggle' (quoting one faculty at the university)? Is there academic rigor and value in the class? While undergraduate students spending a semester or year abroad has been common for many years [Hulstrand, 2006], there is increased emphasis on graduate students to gain some international experience. Almost every university has an outcome of 'global awareness' that it must fulfill, especially within a business school [Bruner & Iannarelli, 2011] where often a 'global
experience’ is mandatory for graduation. Additionally, the students in the business school are the often future business leaders in a global economy [Carley, 2006].

Although the semester or year-long time frame may facilitate a total immersion in another culture, often the expense and time commitment is not feasible for graduate students. They often study only part-time, and have careers and families. The term Short-Term Study Abroad usually is applied to an international program that is less than a semester and provides an opportunity for more students with a diversity of backgrounds to participate. The length of time ranges from a couple of months, in the summer, to a week, during winter or spring break [Donnelly-Smith, 2009 and Keefe, 2008]. They may involve combinations of company visits, workshops, intensive classes, and meeting with alumni and students from local universities. Students have different learning styles and may benefit from the different learning opportunities available in a short-term program. Depending upon the background and interests of the students, the program may be customized. A study of alumni from twenty universities found no significant difference in global engagement between long study abroad programs and shorter study abroad programs [Paige, 2009].

Many study abroad programs focus on learning the culture of the visited country. However, a short-term program can realistically concentrate on a specific academic area(s). There are few programs that give attention to Information Systems or Technology. Some of the experiences, educational aims and lessons learned of one short-term program concentrating in technology and innovation are shared in this paper, and hopefully, others will decide it is a worthwhile undertaking and then share their own successes (and disappointments). First, some background on study-abroad, particularly short-term, is presented, then the mechanics of the actual course, and finally, lessons learned and future activities and research.

II. Short-Term Study Abroad Background

It is sometimes assumed that study abroad is a new phenomena. The University of Delaware claims to have sent students on the first semester based study-abroad in 1923. Indiana
University created summer programs in Europe as early as the 1870s. Recently, due to time and finances, short-term study abroad programs are becoming more widespread than longer programs. They also provide similar benefits to longer term programs [Gullekson, 2011].

Students’ grades achieved in long-term study abroad are usually transmitted back to their home university as transfer credit, and not included in their overall GPA. Students on long-term programs often do not use their time abroad wisely [Donnelly-Smith, 2009], especially since the actual grade does not count. Since the short-term study abroad is sponsored by the home university, the grade is part of their overall GPA and students may benefit more academically than in a long-term program.

What is needed for success in a short-term study abroad program? These programs are often supported by the student’s home university or a consortium of universities and are faculty-created and led. This is different from a semester study abroad, where faculty from the university may approve the course at an international university and then send the students abroad to study. There is a great deal of preparation before actually leaving for the airport.

The program may be part of an existing course, perhaps a few weeks of classroom participation before the actual international visit. It may be a course in itself, with little or no connection to another course. To answer the question about the academic rigor and value, preparation should be similar to preparing for any course. There should be a detailed syllabus, learning objectives, assignments, grading rubrics and an account of the number of hours spent in pursuit of academic learning.

Faculty also benefit from the trip [Ludlum, 2016]. Faculty with extensive international experience, travel or teaching, may be suited to lead a short-term study abroad. Similar to students, they find it difficult to find the time and funding to study abroad. A short-term study abroad enables them to learn with the students. However, there are many and varied responsibilities being with students, whether they are undergraduates or graduates, in an international environment. Faculty may need to deal with disciplinary issues or medical issues, which are usually handled by professionals at the home university. Additionally, faculty may not
be accustomed to spending time with students outside the classroom, but they become the primary contact for students once the international program begins. Faculty need to be available for the duration of the program, which often entails arriving early and leaving after everyone else has departed. It is usually recommended that either two faculty members, or the primary faculty and a staff person travel with the class. One may be needed to be with a student with an emergency, or one may even become ill.

III. Example: Short-Term Study Abroad in a Developing country

This section will detail a university sponsored short-term study abroad that was offered three consecutive years during the week of spring break in March. The school of business at the university was initially approached by a non-profit organization whose mandate is to ‘build a greater understanding of and appreciation for Israel among present and future leaders’. Israel&Co. was interested in helping create a week-long study abroad for graduate students, with an emphasis on Technology and Innovation in Israel. The first year, the company set up the connections with technology firms, mostly start-ups, although a few bigger and more established companies were included. These large firms were encouraging innovation from their employees. The companies’ expertise ranged from cybersecurity, mobile apps, water conservation and the largest bank in Israel, where the CIO is a graduate of the university. Additionally, Israel&Co assisted in identifying key cultural visits. The following two years, faculty built on the initial companies, reached out to colleagues and searched the internet for technology start-ups in Israel.

The business school has a Department of Global and Experiential Education (GEE) that assists with all operational aspects of the short-term study abroad. Initially, they work with the faculty to create marketing materials for the trip and then conduct information sessions about the available programs for the year. There is an on-line system that accepts students’ applications, which is available for review by faculty. However, it is a faculty decision to accept a student for the program. There are strict deadlines for application submission, faculty recommendations and
student deposits to ensure a place in the program. A minimum of 14 students is required for the program to move forward, otherwise the program is cancelled. Faculty may decide to accept more students, but a maximum of 16 is recommended. These decisions are made almost six months before the program begins, allowing students to register for other courses if the program is cancelled. GEE also assists with collecting the fees, registering students, conducting pre-departure orientation, confirming medical clearances, possession of valid passports and visas, and arranging in-country logistics (travel, guides and hotels). Covering the amount of detail involved pre-departure would be a huge burden on faculty if they needed to be responsible.

The students earned 3 elective credits. They were either MBA students with an interest in technology or Masters’ students studying Information Systems. The third year there were four sessions on campus before travel: this number grew each year as the students wanted more preparation and information about the firms and Israel. Therefore, the actual contact time with students was a combination of class-time before and after the actual travel, and the time spent in academic endeavors while in Israel. Similar to an on-campus course, there was a detailed syllabus, learning objectives and assignments with rubrics.

Prior to leaving, there were discussions focusing on two start-up cases set in Israel, one lecture from another faculty member with an expertise on innovation, one lecture on Israel and one pre-departure orientation meeting conducted by GEE. Additionally, readings concerning Israeli start-ups [Senor, 2011] and Israeli history were assigned. Each teams of two students researched one firm to be visited. They also were required to prepare questions for the actual visit and then lead the discussion when abroad. These materials were posted on Blackboard, and the discussion board was used to enable students to become comfortable with the companies and country before leaving on the program.

A typical day consisted of 2 company visits, or workshops and a cultural event. The class had lunch together. Except for opening and final dinners, they had free time for the evening meals: this was suggested by students from the first two years. After a full day of visits and sightseeing, they needed some down-time. The cultural event included ‘tastings’ from the local market,
historical sites and museums. The guides were one of the more valuable assets on the trips: their knowledge of the culture and country was extraordinary and they were always available to answer questions and make recommendations for spending free time, share stories and interact with the students at the end of the day. Since the emphasis of the course was Technology and Innovation, the visits concentrated on start-ups, an incubator and an accelerator, but each trip included a couple of established firms also. While abroad, students engaged socially with alumni from the university and students from Tel Aviv University. During the time in Israel, students were required to daily post feedback about the company visits and workshops. Often they included thoughts about the cultural visits as well.

After returning to the home university, there was another meeting and another assignment. The first two years, the final assignment was a reflection and research paper about the companies and Israeli culture. The third year, one of the start-ups asked for some marketing and supply chain help with their new application, and created a list of needs and wants. Students selected one issue on the list and became the expert and researcher in that area for the Israeli start-up. These reports were shared with the class, refined and then sent to the start-up. There was a debriefing meeting within 2 weeks after returning from abroad. Over the three years, the focus began to shift from purely company visits, to workshops set up by the firms, interaction with students from a local university, to collaboration between the students and an organization.

One of the mandates of GEE is to forge connections with people met during the international visit. Post visit, students are interacting with students from Tel Aviv. When the alumni are in DC they stop for a visit at the business school. We were able to arrange seminars for faculty and students with spokespersons from two of the companies. We are planning a seminar with students from the local university next time the course is offered. One of the Jewish students has returned to Israel, became a citizen and is working in Tel Aviv. We met two alumni, from the United States working at the incubator, and they provided the inspiration for her move.

IV. What did the students think?
• This is the ideal program for anyone who is interested in technology and entrepreneurship, as it not only exposes you to start-ups but also gives you a chance to interact with professionals who work at those companies in a non-stressful environment.

• This program was very relevant to my MSIST degree and expanded my cultural experience.

• The technology company visits were the focus and they were all worthwhile in my opinion, because you got to see first-hand the difference in startups, incubators, accelerators, and an established company.

• It was great that we went to the Tel Aviv University School of Business, and while they did have some students interact with us, it might be better to have a more formal group interaction versus a casual evening reception. The schedule may not permit this and if it does not, no worries, I still enjoyed interacting with the group there.

• Every trip we made had a purpose and reason behind it. I think everything we did and every place we visited added to the experience.

• Israel Museum where the Dead Sea Scrolls reside is great. I recommend taking the time to look at the map and realize just how much there is to see (sculpture gardens and 3rd floor art exhibit -- I never made it there because I was focused on other areas); doing a little research might help to be more strategic with your free time.

V. How will it affect their careers?

• I am more familiar with startup culture and spirit and am more confident if working in a start-up company.

• I started thinking that maybe I can start my own business in the future.

• I should go to Israel to get funding when I create my start-up company.

• I intend to pursue a career in the technology industry.

• I want to work in international business.
• I may take a closer look at the cybersecurity field based on a visit to a prominent cybersecurity company.

VI. Lessons learned

As the faculty member responsible for the course, and without any experience in a study-abroad or Israel, I needed to prepare for the trip with research about the country and innovation. [Hulstrand, 2006, p. 50] provides key elements for creating a successful high-quality short-term study abroad program (see Appendix). It is a good beginning reference for anyone attempting a short-term study abroad.

Similar to traditional courses, there is a great deal of preparation required; however there are added elements that require time and attention. Not only is the content important, but scheduling the company visits is similar to having guest speakers: hoping they appear and be interesting for the students. It felt like almost every minute needed to be scheduled and be an extraordinary experience. Along with the actual course, there is being responsible for the students’ safety. This has the potential to be stressful and overwhelming. We were fortunate. During one visit, one of the students had an allergic reaction to some medicine and required a visit to the emergency room, but not a hospital stay. Students sometimes miss the bus, especially in the mornings. One faculty member went with the bus, and the other went to the emergency room or waited for the students (who were not late again). This underscores the need for additional support for the primary faculty member.

Some method of communication between all participants needs to be created. Planes get delayed, students get lost or miss the bus, students want others to join them at a restaurant – any reason is good enough to establish a communication protocol for the duration of the program. We only lost one student in the Old City of Jerusalem, but because we were connected via Whatsapp we were reunited quickly. Late students were able to locate the rest of the group and join them.
Learn from previous programs. There was valuable feedback about the appropriateness of some of the company visits. One in particular was overly technical, and not appropriate for the students, especially the MBAs. This, in part, could have been a lack of knowledge about the students’ background, and perhaps we did not provide enough information. In the following company visits, more information was sent via email and also reiterated at the introduction of the students when arriving at the organization, and this appeared to alleviate the problem. The students from the first two programs wanted to visit one of the universities and meet their peers. As part of the third program, GEE was able to coordinate this hope. The local university hosted the students and faculty, and students from both universities went out afterwards. Two discovered they were both attending the same university in Italy in the fall. Faculty has interacted with other faculty and as mentioned, planning seminars, which will provide a greater opportunity to network.

Selecting the students is an important task. We tried to get diversity, male and female, and international and domestic. None of the students spoke Hebrew, and only one had ever been to Israel. Some had extensive travel with work, some had previous study-abroad programs and some had never been abroad. Again, we were fortunate. There were no issues among the students enrolled in the program, and that was commented on during the debriefings. In the true spirit of Technology and Innovation, two of the students joined in a mobile app start-up endeavor.

These programs are expensive and are sometimes covered by scholarships and grants, but most often are the student’s responsibility. Business schools recognize the need for experiential global learning through short-term study abroad programs and must find the financial means to support them and the students.

VII. Future

Carley (2006) studied the impact of short-term study abroad on academic achievement, personal development and intercultural skills. Kurt (2013) queries students about the change in their global awareness due to the short-term study abroad. There are self-reported student perceptions about the value of the program [Zamastil-Vondrova, 2011]. Universities ask students
about their satisfaction with the short-term study abroad. While student satisfaction is important, Carley’s and Kurt’s emphasis on evaluation and research on academic achievement and global awareness is needed. With some solid data on the impact on academic learning and international sensitivity, to name just two important outcomes, some of the observations of a short-term study abroad as a boondoggle may dissipate.

A list of best practices should be compiled and shared, perhaps a panel at another conference. This paper presents some of the suggestions and procedures that are published in education journals and were followed in this short-term study abroad.

VIII. Summary

Was the short-term study abroad with graduate students studying Technology and Innovation in a developing country successful? It fulfilled the need for graduate students to gain some ‘global awareness’ without disrupting their careers and family life. There was academic rigor in the class. The students believed it was a great program and their enthusiasm spilled over to the following years. They were exposed to a different culture and unique options for careers. One student is using her knowledge in her current position, as her organization is interested in relationships with firms in Israel. The faculty members and staff involved think it was worth the extra effort to create and operationalize the program. It is felt that a short-term program in Information Systems should be mandatory in today’s technology-driven culture. There are many international hubs of technology and innovation that may be explored.

REFERENCES:


Donnelly-Smith, L. (2009), “Global Learning through Short-Term Study Abroad” Peer Review, (Fall 2009), Vol. 11, No 4.


Appendix

Key Elements to Create and Maintain Successful High-quality Short-term Education Abroad Programs (Hulstrand, 2006, p. 50)

- Unassailable academic integrity
- Integration into the curriculum
- Affordable program design
- Good pre-departure orientation and preparation
- Faculty buy-in and participation
- Interaction with the host community
- Incorporation of local Language
- Opportunities for cultural enrichment, and a faculty leader trained to provide on-site interpretation and support
- A safe and secure environment
- Competent, experienced staff
- Delivering what you promise (meeting student expectations)
- Opportunities for guided reflection
- Balance in program activities
- Maintenance of a strong, healthy group dynamic
- Opportunities for debriefing, reflection, reintegration upon return to campus