

AWAKENING THE SLEEPER:
INCREASING ACCESS TO STUDY ABROAD

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to help the study abroad programs at Texas State University increase student participation. Many students wish to take advantage of the international opportunities provided by our university, but are unable to do so because of the numerous barriers that prevent them from participating. Conversely, a large number of Texas State students do not even know of the opportunities and resources that the campus provides, which results in a lack of student involvement. With the intention of increasing study abroad participation, I propose creating a social media site that will allow the Texas State University students interested in studying abroad, those currently abroad, and the alumni who studied overseas while enrolled in the university to connect with one other and the study abroad office. This site will also serve faculty and staff who want to mentor the potential or new participants and remain in contact with the former participants. In the following chapters, I explain how this site will help increase student awareness of the opportunities provided by the study abroad programs and address a number of the barriers students face. In the first chapter of this thesis, I examine the main obstacles that discourage Texas State students from participating, as expressed via surveys of the students who have, as well as those who have not, studied abroad. This chapter will also include input from Texas State's study abroad office. In the second section, I explore the importance of alumni involvement. How can Texas State's former students help its current students achieve their dream of studying overseas? Chapter three

is an overview of the proposed website: how it will function, the services it will provide, and what it will mean for Texas State's study abroad programs.

Introduction

Mark Twain wrote:

Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime. (650)

Anyone who has traveled knows the truth in Mark Twain's words. Travel takes people away from their accustomed routines and compels them to adapt to unfamiliar conditions. It shows them customs, people, notions, and settings different from their own. Even leisurely travel can open a person's eyes and teach her more about herself and the world. Perhaps Mary Ritter Beard put it best when she said, "Certainly, travel is more than the seeing of sights; it is a change that goes on, deep and permanent, in the ideas of living" ("Mary Ritter Beard"). Whether traveling for the simple purpose of sightseeing or with the intention of discovering something new, humans gain many benefits from packing a suitcase and hitting the road or hopping on a plane and heading somewhere away from home.

However, traveling for the purpose of education or studying proves especially valuable. Participating in a study abroad program provides an experience that only studying outside one's own country can, as many who have been involved in such programs can testify. Those in support of studying abroad agree that:

...going abroad to study gives students distinctive learning opportunities that they can't get at home or online -- direct experiences of new languages, cultures, and pedagogies -- that prepare them for careers in a global, knowledge-based economy. (Marcum et al.)

Similarly, Mark Salisbury, director of institutional research and assessment at Augustana College, who asserts that, “under specific learning conditions and as a part of a sequence of intentionally designed educational experiences,” studying abroad can “uniquely contribute to a student's development toward a set of complex learning outcomes” (“We’re Muddying the Message”). Most, if not all, institutions of higher education would support Salisbury’s stance and acknowledge that international education is critical for students and benefits the futures of both the student and the institution. In addition, many employers will agree that studying abroad can provide their future employees with knowledge and skills that apply to any workplace and contribute to success (Salisbury “3 Ways to Help”).

My own experience overseas certainly supports the views expressed above. In the spring of 2013, I had the great fortune of participating in a study abroad program through Academic Programs International, a Texas State affiliated program. That semester, I flew to England where I enrolled directly at the University of Leeds and spent five and a half months experiencing life overseas. API provided pre-departure advising for every issue imaginable, from suggested airlines or phone companies to procuring a student visa, handling the culture shock, and much more. It also provided a post-arrival tour of the campus and city, as well as an orientation that covered selecting classes, understanding differences in cultures and campus customs, and awareness of the varying vocabulary.

Through API, I had secured housing, opportunities to travel throughout England, and an on-site coordinator who helped with any and every concern or question I had. My time in England could not have been more enlightening, personally and academically. Not only did it affect minor inclinations, like what foods I prefer or how I take my tea, but it also helped me improve important skills like how I manage my time and my writing style. Being away from family and the familiar challenged me in an abundance of ways, and I left with my views of myself, my country, and the world forever changed. Nothing in my life has proven to be as life-altering as my time at the University of Leeds.

Because of the extraordinary experiences I had and the changes I saw in myself after studying outside of the United States, I want to let other students know of these opportunities and to encourage and help them to take advantage of what Texas State University provides. Rarely does anyone regret traveling abroad for academic purposes. Even if a student only discovers that she does not like being far from home, at least she will have learned that much more about herself. Apart from personal benefits, diversifying study experiences has many professional and academic benefits as well, like making a student more appealing to future employers or graduate schools. In 2012, the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES Abroad) conducted a survey of recent college graduates. The results of the survey indicated that “students who study abroad found jobs sooner, at higher salaries, and in their chosen fields far more than those who chose to stay on-campus for four years” (Cook-Anderson). Put into numerical terms, this survey showed that about 90% of those who had traveled overseas to study started their first job within half a year of finishing school. In contrast, only 49% of those who responded to a separate survey and had *not* studied abroad found work within twelve

months of graduating. Furthermore, over 65% of those surveyed who had studied abroad “found a career-related position within a timeframe that met or exceeded their expectations” (Cook-Anderson). Gretchen Cook-Anderson, the author of the article that provided these findings, argues that this is the case because:

[k]ey jobs skills such as adaptability, global understanding and tolerance, leadership, and independence are directly fostered by learning and living abroad. In today's highly competitive job market that is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, college students can make a strategic choice to study abroad as undergraduates and increase their attractiveness as top candidates for jobs in their chosen careers. (n. pag.)

With so many benefits for students to gain from studying abroad, whether it is learning more about themselves, what they can endure, the strengths they can offer, or specific skills they will need for future careers, the opportunity should be available to those who wish to take advantage of it.

For these reasons and because of my own irreplaceable experiences, I have chosen to focus on study abroad programs at Texas State University. The purpose of this thesis is to assist in the growth of the programs by creating a social media site that will allow past, current, and potential Texas State University study abroad participants to connect with one other, the study abroad office, and faculty or staff members. This type of resource often serves as the first reference point for students considering participation in a study abroad program (Bishop 400). Students use sites such as this “during the processes of choosing, applying to, preparing for, debriefing from, and remembering their travels...” (Bishop 400). Social media can provide an invaluable way to meet new people

who share similar passions, to find helpful information, and to learn about new ideas and opportunities. Since Texas State does not yet have an interactive site for Study Abroad, I propose creating one, thus providing students with a versatile resource.

In the first chapter, I examine the barriers that students face when considering or applying for an academic travel experience. Salisbury offers his opinion on the greatest initial obstacle, stating:

Unlike many undergraduate educational opportunities, participation in study-abroad programs is preceded by a complex planning process. The experience comes to fruition only when students are certain about their intentions. If interests change or resolve waivers, it's less likely they will follow through. (“We’re Muddying the Message”)

For Salisbury, frustrations in the planning process, i.e. deciding whether or not to apply, where and when to apply, or what program and classes to choose, create the greatest obstacles for students and may discourage them from participating. Could this be the case for Texas State’s students? Does lack of certainty, whether from concerns about the cost, the potentially overwhelming application process, or how to get started, negatively affect their interest in or resolve to study abroad? To answer this question and to gain a better understanding of the difficulties Texas State students, specifically, have encountered when considering studying abroad, I asked all undergraduates to participate in a survey. Respondents answered questions regarding their reasons for choosing whether or not to participate and what frustrations they experienced once they started the process of selecting and/or applying to the programs. Of the 31,005 undergraduates enrolled at Texas State for the fall 2014 semester, 2,497 responded to the survey, providing useful

insight into the struggles students face regarding study abroad. I will also explore what Texas State has already done over the past five years to increase the number of participants. Knowing where the university currently stands is important for learning where it can go. I elaborate on this topic and explain the results of the survey in chapter one.

In the second part of this thesis, I review the findings and views expressed in the literature that analyzes alumni involvement. What inspires an alumnus to give back, whether through time, funds, or other means? How can Texas State reach out to study abroad graduates and encourage them to get more involved? In what way will a greater participation of former students benefit the current students interested in studying abroad and address the concerns expressed in the surveys? These questions and more I address in chapter two.

For the third and final section, I give an overview of the proposed social media site. I explain how I plan to arrange the site, the services it will provide, and how users of the site will be able to interact with it. I will also explain how such a website will address the challenges that students and the study abroad office faces. On the difficulty of reaching more ears and encouraging greater participation, Salisbury observes that “maybe current marketing messages about the value of study abroad work more like a dog whistle audible to those tuned to an internationalist frequency than like a megaphone that can be heard by everyone” (“We’re Muddying the Message”). I noticed the flyers, emails, and fairs about participating in a study abroad program because I already knew I wanted to participate. I was tuned to that internationalist frequency before I even started attending the university, but not every student can pick up that frequency. Some need the volume

turned way up to grab their attention. It is my hope that Texas State will be able to use this website to turn that volume up and make it the megaphone that replaces the dog whistle.

Chapter One: The Barriers

At the end of September 2014, each Texas State undergraduate student received an email with a link to the survey and a short explanation of its purpose. I kept the survey open for a month and received 2,497 responses, representing approximately 8.05% of the undergraduate student body. Their answers provided a sense of the general opinions and perceptions Texas State students have about their university's study abroad opportunities, as well as studying abroad in general, and the frustrations they face throughout the decision-making process. I divided the survey into three sections, one for the students who had already studied abroad (YES-students), one for those who had yet to do so (NO-students), and one for those who are in the process of applying (IP-students). Two hundred and nine answered yes, 2,142 answered no, and 146 indicated they were in the process. All three groups answered questions regarding age, major/minor, classification, and gender, as well as a final question concerning their interest in joining a social media site designed to connect former, current, and potential study abroad participants. Once the students selected their study abroad status, the survey directed them to individualized questions.

The first question for the students who had studied abroad asked what influenced them to do so. The top three responses were the interest in experiencing a new culture and traveling (62.85%), the desire to learn a language and gain experience using that language (12.57%), and the appeal of specific locations and the classes offered there

(11.4%). Other influences included professors, recommendations from friends or family, and a desire to gain field experience to “build up” a resume. When asked how they first heard about their program, 41.42% responded that they learned of the opportunity from a professor, 23.67% attended a fair or info session, and 21.89% learned of their program from the university’s study abroad website. The YES-students were then asked to rate their experience with Texas State’s study abroad application process and the study abroad office, specifically. The process received an average rating of 3.78 out of 5, with 65.14% rating their experience as either Good or Excellent. The rating for the study abroad office was lower, with an average of 3.39 out of 5, and 47.43% rating it as either Good or Excellent. Students expressed that the most difficult challenges they faced during the application process were a lack of communication between the study abroad office and themselves or other offices (28.9%), lack of clarity with due dates and form requirements (16.18%), and issues with transferring money or meeting payment deadlines (12.72%). However, 23.12% of the students stated that they had no problem with their application process. The YES-students also answered questions about applying for and receiving financial aid. The majority of the students (44.38%) applied for and received financial aid, 17.75% applied but did not receive aid, and 37.87% did not apply at all, citing having enough funding already or knowing they would not qualify as their reasons for not applying. 57.14% of YES-students indicated an interest in joining the proposed social media site.

Of the students who responded no to having studied abroad, 49.46% cited financial concerns as their primary reason for refraining from studying abroad, while 13.32% responded that they could not leave their family or job. Other top responses

included their not having had the opportunity to do so, concerns with course credit transfer, lack of choices related to their major, their being new to Texas State (either a freshman or transfer), lack of knowledge of the opportunities, reluctance to leave home, or no interest in traveling abroad. When asked if they would like to study abroad, if the expressed issues could be resolved, 78.68% answered yes. The NO-students were also asked if they would be interested in joining the proposed site, with 42.09% responding yes.

The influences cited by the students in the process of applying for study abroad followed a similar trend as the responses from the YES-students. The top reasons for applying were a desire to travel or experience the world (67.7%), recommendations by family and friends (14.2%), interest in the locations and classes offered (7.1%), and hopes of learning a language (6.3%). Other influences were previous time abroad, wanting to take advantage of the benefits it could provide for the future, and the recommendation of a professor. Here again, professors proved to reach the greatest number of students, as 38.52% learned of their program from a professor, while 25.41% used the study abroad website, likewise 25.41% were influenced by a friend, and 19.67% attended a fair or information session. When asked about their experience with the application process so far, the students gave it an average rating of 3.35 out of 5, with the majority of the responses falling under Average or Good. Their average rating for the study abroad office was 3.45 out of 5, with the majority again falling under Average or Good. Their top challenges also closely reflected those expressed by the YES-students, the major concerns being funding, deadlines, and understanding the paperwork. Regarding financial aid, 87.79% plan to apply, 0.82% have already applied and received

aid, 5.74% have applied and are awaiting a response, and 10.66% do not plan to apply. An overwhelming 81.97% of the IP-students answered yes to the question of whether they would be interested in joining the proposed social media site.

The results suggest that the most significant barriers students face when considering study abroad are financial concerns, perceived lack of opportunity (i.e. they just have not “had the chance”), absence of a study abroad selection related to their major, or concerns over the correct transfer of course credit. If students overcome these concerns, they then have barriers for the actual application process that discourage them from participating. These included frustrations with payment processing or deadlines, unclear understanding of application deadlines or how to fill out certain forms, and whom to talk to regarding the forms or finding out more information.

Over 50% of the students who had already studied abroad were interested in joining the social media site, suggesting that former study abroad participants are interested in staying connected and helping others. The majority of the IP-students expressed interest in joining the site, suggesting that such a resource would be highly valuable to those going through the application process. And although less than half of the NO-students showed an interest in joining the site, there was only a difference of about 15.82%, suggesting that the site could serve as a useful source of information or encouragement for studying abroad. All of those who answered yes to being interested in the site also selected the features they would like to see on it. The results will be discussed in chapter three.

I interviewed the associate director of Texas State’s study abroad office, Ms. Isis de la O, at the beginning of the fall 2014 semester to learn the office’s perspective on the

obstacles it faces in promoting and facilitating study abroad opportunities. The limited staffing of the study abroad office presents a major challenge. Though the number of participants is not yet where many would like it to be, several hundred students do apply each year. With fewer than five people on staff to answer their questions and process their applications, such tasks can prove to be very difficult and time-consuming. Other challenges the office faces include matters of recruiting and raising awareness. They must familiarize themselves with the policies and procedures for faculty-led programs, as well as affiliated, non-affiliated, and exchange programs, which may all have different application processes and requirements that frequently change from term to term.

The study abroad office is very aware of these challenges, as well as the struggles students face, and have taken several steps recently to address these issues. In response to being insufficiently staffed, the office requested and was given funding to create two new full time positions, which will allow them to review applications and respond to students' questions in a more timely manner. Texas State also just created a position for an assistant vice president for international affairs, who will work with Ms. De la O in addressing many of these challenges. Furthermore, the study abroad office takes advantage of multiple opportunities for raising awareness by holding study abroad fairs, placing advertisements in campus shuttles, having faculty promote studying abroad in class, using Twitter and Facebook, placing table tents in the dining commons, and including a study abroad slide in the New Student Orientation presentations on Bobcat Days. As for addressing some of the major financial challenges students face, the office administers the International Education Fee Scholarship, which receives its funding from Texas State student fees. It also offers information to students on several other

scholarship resources as well. However, it is clear from the students' responses that many feel the need for, and would benefit from, additional assistance throughout the study abroad process. I hope to provide that additional assistance and support through the design and implementation of this social media site.

Chapter Two: The Importance and Impact of Alumni Involvement

It is no secret that alumni play an especially significant role in the life of a university. They serve as representations of the accomplishments of their alma mater, carry its name across the globe, and contribute to the success of future alumni, whether through financial support, advice, or expertise. The same holds true for study abroad programs as well. Study abroad alumni can publicize the strengths of their program, advocate for studying abroad wherever they go, and contribute to the success of future study abroad students. Just as a university has a way of reaching out to alumni and reconnecting them with their school and the students there, study abroad needs a way to keep in touch with its alumni and to help them stay involved with their campus and study abroad students, as such a relationship would greatly benefit everyone involved.

Before a university or program tries to reach out to alumni, they must first understand what inspires an alumnus to give back, whether through time, funds, or other means. Multiple universities and organizations have released surveys that produced generally similar results. These surveys showed that the “disposition on the relationship with the alma mater” has a major influence on the “decision making regarding [alumni] interaction with the university” (Gaier, “Alumni Satisfaction” 280; see also Baade et al.) Put simply, stronger bonds with the university lead to “a greater willingness to contribute” (Baade et al.). Such studies also showed that those who were more involved in extracurricular activities (thus strengthening that bond with their university) were more

likely to give back to their school, as they wanted to continue to share their passions with like-minded people and to see their organizations, clubs, and other activities grow. (Gaier, “Alumni Satisfaction” 280; Miller et al. 6; Gaier “Increasing Alumni Involvement” 6). In relation to this, research conducted by Georgetown University suggests that increased interaction due to shared interests or clubs among current students and alumni generated a higher level of giving (Langley). Furthermore, studies suggested that a relationship existed between “alumni giving and the alumnus' academic success and satisfaction” (Miller et al. 7; Gaier “Alumni Satisfaction” 280). Included in the factors that lead to satisfaction was the receipt of a scholarship. Former students who had received scholarships showed a desire to give back so that other students might have the same opportunities (Hoyt 14). In sum:

The quality of shared relationships at the collegiate level may impact the level of involvement as alumni. And in turn, the level of alumni involvement impacts the voluntary contribution from alumni... What happens during the collegiate experience fundamentally shapes alumni perception, opinion, and relationship with the alma mater. These influence the alumni involvement with the higher education institution. (Gaier “Increasing Alumni Involvement” 7)

Also worth noting is the fact that the surveys indicated that the more personal the solicitation efforts became, the more the level of alumni involvement appeared to increase (Hoyt 17; Langley).

After understanding *why* former students get involved, it is helpful to examine *how* to get them involved. How might Texas State reach out to study abroad graduates and encourage them to become more engaged in what happens on campus and in current

students' lives? Robert Burdenski, an annual giving consultant, believes that colleges should look “for ways to use Facebook and other social media to both solicit and thank alumni” (Masterson et al). Other ways to increase contributions of either time or money include engaging alumni early, reconnecting or maintaining connections with professors, demonstrating what their contributions are doing specifically for the students and the school, and reaching out to alumni for reasons other than requesting donations, like to simply ask how they are doing (Masterson et al.; Langley).

While my proposed website cannot be the answer to everything, it can certainly help with involving the alumni. If their desire is to once more take part in an activity about which they are passionate or to see the extracurricular activity they were involved in grow, the website will allow them to do just that without ever having to leave their home. If they want to inspire other students, offer advice, or give them the same opportunity they had by donating to a study abroad scholarship, the social media site will give them that chance. It will also allow them to reconnect with former professors, other alumni, and study abroad enthusiasts, and to see exactly how their contributions are directly affecting the students and the university. Ideally, the site will fill “a need for the alumni... [to] give back to the college and mentor the next generation” (Palmer et al. 201).

A number of other universities have used alumni to enhance their study abroad programs. The College of Nursing at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah recently used volunteer alumni as affiliate faculty on a required study abroad course. After sending emails with details of the trip and the requirements, several alumni responded that they “were willing to pay their own way, use their vacation time, [and] serve their

alma mater and future peers...” (Palmer et al. 199). While alumni in the program did face many challenges, like having to take time off work, “personal or family issues, [or] financial concerns,” the authors state that the benefits far outweighed these challenges (200). They cite successes such as “one-on-one student experiences with professional alumni” (200). Having alumni present also offered:

comfortable stability to undergraduate students as they learned to navigate alien environments whose elements included an unfamiliar city, multiple foreign speech dialects... and dissociation from familiar routines, foods, sanitary conveniences, and even smells.” (200)

The undergraduate students felt that, with the assistance of the alumni, they were able to learn “to cope with, accept, and even appreciate the brilliant differences” of the unfamiliar cultures of each location” (200). The authors reported that “[w]hen asked about their experience, students felt that being with alumni enhanced their learning and helped them gain additional cultural sensitivity [and] insight...” (200). All in all, using alumni to help the undergraduate students was a success.

While this is a bit different from what I am suggesting, as the alumni were on site with the students rather than just offering advice over the internet, the concept still applies. With someone who has been to the location available to answer questions and understand what the student is going through, seeing, experiencing, and feeling, perhaps they can provide valuable comfort to the student already abroad. Having contact with alumni who have used their study abroad to their advantage, turned it into a career, or applied it to their career or graduate course of study, can help current students gain insight, form ideas about which career or graduate program they want to pursue, or get an

early start on figuring out the next steps they need to take. Using this social medium, alumni will not have to worry about putting their jobs on hold, leaving family, or managing financial concerns, since all they will need is a connection to the internet. However, they will still be able to provide personal experiences, insight, and guidance. Being a part of this website will allow the alumni to give back and “provide leadership to their younger counterparts,” while simultaneously helping the current students make the most of their time abroad, before, during, and after (Palmer et al. 200).

During a speech to newly returned study abroad students, Matthew Cossolotto, president and founder of Study Abroad Alumni International and a study abroad alum, commented:

When you studied abroad, I’m sure you were told many times that you would be serving as unofficial ambassadors of the United States....your campus...and even your community back home. Now that you’re home again, I hope you’ll become ambassadors for the value of the study abroad experience and for the need for greater international awareness. (568)

This sort of inspiration is exactly what Texas State’s own alumni can provide-- encouragement to get involved elsewhere and to advocate. They can give advice on how to use one’s study abroad experience advantageously in the professional world. As more alumni encourage more students to get involved, and those students encourage other students to get involved, their efforts will create a snowball effect, helping the program increase its numbers. As Cossolotto stated, “The potential is enormous. There are millions of study abroad alumni around the world...all with a strong emotional connection to the study abroad experience...” (567). If our site is successful, it will give

students the ability to tap into the abundant “supply” of study abroad alumni and take advantage of that enormous potential.

Chapter Three: The Website

By now, most people know how effective social media can be for spreading the word or raising money. One does not have to look far to find an example of something going viral, reaching billions and raising millions. Take the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, for example. In a matter of three months, the ALS Association received \$115 million in donations largely due to the spread of the Ice Bucket Challenge through social media (“Ice Bucket Challenge”). There are many downfalls to social media as well, but when carefully monitored and used for constructive purposes, they can also prove to be very beneficial. Social media have the potential to “support collaboration and interaction, enhance students’ learning experiences through customization and personalization, [and] provide rich opportunities for networking” (Ivala et al.). Furthermore, such sites can provide “alumni support – that is, reaching out to former classmates to give or receive help in managing the ups and downs of . . . college life,” or, in this case, study abroad (“Online Social Networks”). It is for these reasons and more that I propose creating a social media site to help support and enhance study abroad at Texas State.

Invitations to the website will be extended to all study abroad alumni, current participant and applicants, and interested students, faculty, or staff who ask to be included. Only those invited to join will be able to do so. This approach will make it easier to monitor the interactive exchanges of users and discourage unwelcome or uncivil comments. All that is required to join is an email address, though not necessarily a Texas

State email. When asked on the survey (discussed in chapter 1) what features students would like to see on the website, of the 2,497 responders, 89.58% answered, “the ability to ask for help with study abroad applications,” and 84.03% responded that they would like to be able to share advice, stories, and photos. “Information on how to use study abroad to your advantage” was third most popular (79.45%), followed by information on new opportunities abroad (78.20%), ability to contact students currently studying abroad at locations of interest (77.44%), ability to contact study abroad alumni (52.77%), and information on funding study abroad, which was mentioned by 57% of the respondents who commented on “other” preferred website features.

Students who are interested in studying abroad, are already abroad, or are back on campus will have all of the above options. They will be able to join the site and express concerns, ask for help with applications, and ask/give advice on all aspects of the study abroad experience. Students will also find information provided by the administrator of the site in the form of links or posts regarding funding a study abroad trip and new opportunities abroad. Additionally, other members of the site will be encouraged to share such information. The study abroad office will have access to the website, as well, and will therefore be able to provide information and advice. Considering 90% expressed a desire for the ability to ask for help, and lack of clarity was a top challenge for both the YES and IP-students, this will be an important feature. In response to the 84% that expressed an interest in being able to share photographs, etc., the site will enable all participants to share pictures and stories of their time abroad. In an article analyzing the rhetoric of studying abroad, Sarah C. Bishop writes that “these images may provide the only visual depictions of the university’s study abroad program that the student may

encounter before traveling, and therefore, the significance of the photographs should not be diminished” (404). The pictures will certainly play a role in encouraging interested students and will simultaneously give former participants a way to process and share their experiences.

Salisbury offers useful advice about the professional application of the study abroad experience in, “3 Ways to Help Make Generation Study Abroad a Success.” He maintains that:

Students who study abroad are more likely to succeed professionally if and only if they can articulate to a prospective employer specific ways in which the international experience deepened their understanding of themselves and the world in which they will work, and they have substantive learning that they know how to apply in the context of their future profession. At the very least we need to be able to articulate to students exactly how studying abroad can give them this advantage. (n. pag.)

Using the proposed web site, alumni will be able to respond to questions about how they used their study abroad experience beyond their time as students, and will have the opportunity to provide further contact information to interested members, if they so desire. We already have a sizeable list of study abroad alumni and an email by which to reach them to get the site started. As a study abroad alumnus, Cossolotto was able to give advice like this: “One of the things I really want to do today is to encourage you to appreciate this experience. Take time. Think about it. Record it. Write about it. Savor it. Especially tell other people about it” (565). In his speech to the study abroad alumni, he provides several examples of how significant and memorable moments in his career have

been linked directly to his experience abroad. His speech demonstrates the type of advice an alumnus could contribute, advice that students might not hear from family and friends or through the application process. Having alumni who have been through the process, who know what they would do differently and what they would not change, will help students enhance their experience, be more prepared, and get more out of their time abroad. The website will also provide announcements and links to videos, articles, and many other useful sources of information regarding all aspects of the study abroad experience.

The website will also help to publicize and promote studying abroad. It will give the study abroad office another way of reaching students, one in which students often do the advertising themselves. The site will not just say that studying abroad will be a transformative process, but will provide student accounts that state what specifically caused their transformation or how exactly it took place. On this Bishop has commented that “the benefit of the existence of these personalized narratives should not be minimized; indeed, they include highly personal accounts of unique experiences that may work to reveal the vast diversity in students’ experiences abroad” (408). Presumably, this sharing of information will help to create the snowball effect mentioned in chapter two, which will lead to ever increasing numbers of students hearing and learning about study abroad opportunities.

The site may also help to address funding concerns, in part, through the support of alumni. Several studies exist to support the effectiveness of alumni involvement on increasing donations, for example, “Baker, 1998; Hunter, 1997; Klostermann, 1995; Patouillet, 2000; Pearson, 1996; Rosser, 1997; Shim, 2001; Taylor and Martin, 1995;

Violand, 1998; Young and Fischer, 1996” (qtd. in Hoyt 8). These suggest that, as more alumni become involved with their alma maters and the length of time that they participate as alumni grows, the likelihood of their donating to the school grows as well. If multiple study abroad alumni join the site and find it worth their time to interact with the students, their increased participation may lead to increased donations. These donations could then be used to establish scholarships, pay for program expenses, and/or encourage more giving in the future.

As Bishop has noted, “[T]he rhetoric surrounding the study abroad experience should not be conceived as existing outside of or around the traveling experience, but rather within it, as a part of the experience itself” (411). This rhetoric includes all the stories and photos students will see, the exciting promises of new opportunities abroad, the availability of funding, and the promises of the benefits they will reap in the future. If all of this helps to make the study abroad experience the incredible time that it is, as Bishop proposes, then what better way to help Texas State students have an even more amazing travel experience than by providing all of these resources in one place?

Conclusion

As Salisbury very aptly observed, “The reason we all put our heart and soul into international education is because of the learning that we believe is critical for our students and our future” (“3 Ways to Help”). Certainly, traveling for studies provides many benefits for the individual. It is:

one of the best ways to develop cross-cultural understanding and communication skills, deepen one’s perspective on current issues facing the world, strengthen foreign language skills, and cultivate an interest in further contact with other cultures and peoples.” (Mohajeri Norris et al. 383)

In addition, the knowledge a student gains “as a result of increased access to people and places does not have a one-way effect but rather gives a ‘perspective from which to view others and gain a reflected sense of self’” (Bishop 407). It is also simply a chance to travel without having to take time away from school, and such an opportunity can also impact future careers. In a survey conducted by the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES Abroad) between 1950-1999, 96% of the 17,000 participants credited their experience with “increasing their self-confidence, a quality that can assist in a multitude of future endeavors” (Mohajeri Norris et al. 391). Eighty-four percent of alumni “who worked internationally attested that their study abroad experience enabled them to acquire a skill set that influenced their career path” (390).

Moreover, traveling overseas for education is valuable to the college or university as a whole. It enhances prestige, increases appreciation for different cultures on campus, and, as Bishop puts it, allows “American universities to gain publicity in an international context” (399). Bishop also notes that “evidence exists that suggests a positive correlation between grade point average and educational travel” (399). If this proves true, then increased participation in educational travel could lead to improved overall academic performance at the home university. Additionally, Bishop points out that “promoting study abroad allows US universities to respond to federally advanced mandates such as the US Senate’s declaration of 2006 as the ‘Year of Study Abroad’ . . .” (Bishop 399). These benefits for the university constitute further evidence that study abroad is vital.

Because studying abroad so greatly benefits the individual as well as the school, giving students who wish to travel abroad for educational purposes the opportunity to do so should be a priority for any institution of higher education. Whether pledging to increase study abroad participation campus-wide or creating a new administrative position focused on internationalization, Texas State University has certainly pushed studying abroad to the forefront in recent years and taken many steps towards making studying abroad a reality for its students. However, there is still plenty of room to grow, and the creation of the social media site has the potential to aid in that growth considerably. Author Frank Herbert wrote: “Without new experiences, something inside of us sleeps. The sleeper must awaken” (“Frank Herbert Quotes”). Whether that new experience is studying abroad or meeting a new student and helping him or her make the most of that experience, I hope this website will help anyone who decides to be a part of it to awaken to the many opportunities it can help make possible.

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