

# How Study Abroad Programs Impact a Students' Futures: A Western Michigan University Case Study

**Ashley A. King**  
Saint Mary's College

**Dr. Lucius F. Hallett, IV\***  
Western Michigan University

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\*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Lucius F. Hallett, IV, Department of Geography, Western Michigan University, 1903 West Michigan Ave., Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5424, 1-269-387-3407, lucius.hallett@wmich.edu.

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## **Abstract**

This study assesses study abroad programs at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Michigan, to examine the lasting effects on students' careers, as well as, their personal and social development. Given the consistent increase in students studying abroad, it is important to know how and in what ways these experiences are affecting futures. Through a study of survey data collected from past participants in study abroad programs over eight years at Western Michigan University, we analyze whether significant effects developed for students regarding: language fluency and use, academic achievement, cultural development, personal growth, and professional attainment, as well as, how their study abroad experience impacted their lives following graduation. The findings, through gauging the quality of students' experiences, will

assist administrators and coordinators in study abroad programs in higher education towards designing future programs and assessing the potential for success of that design and the long-term impact on participants.

**Keywords:** Study abroad programs, student international travel, career impacts, program design

## Introduction

Study abroad opportunities for students in higher education have the potential to be career-changing, life-defining, transformative experiences that will influence them throughout their lives. Courses offered by study abroad programs are, typically, the same, or similar to those offered on the home campus, but experienced at an alternative setting overseas. The curriculum of study abroad programs also opens opportunities for students to study subjects that they might not normally pursue at their home university. Students are being encouraged to participate in study abroad experiences “of various durations, at different points – and sometimes more than once – in their academic careers” (Obst, Bhandari, & Witherell, 2007, p. 6).

For the purpose of this research, study abroad is defined as, “all educational programs that take place outside the geographical boundaries of the country of origin” (Kitsantas, 2004, p. 441). Researchers claim there are positive and negative aspects for students studying abroad. Included among the gains are: developing an international perspective, achieving heightened intellectual development, forming a national identity, increasing self-understanding, enhancing personal growth, developing increased tolerance, learning greater independence, and attaining openness and receptivity to other cultures (Dolby, 2004; Inglis, Rolls, & Kristy, 1998; Nash, 1976). Other benefits include: “an enhanced worldview, cross-cultural effectiveness, increased interest in travel, art, foreign language, history, and architecture, increased thought, self-reliance, self-confidence, and personal well-being” (Kitsantas, 2004, p. 441).

But even though some researchers enumerate positive aspects of study abroad programs, others suggest problems exist that are frequently ignored. Dwyer (2004, p. 151) points out that, “conventional wisdom in the study abroad field has held that more is better,” and further, “the standard assumption is that meaningful advancement in language learning and other academic disciplines using a culture-specific pedagogy requires at least a full year of study abroad.” Aside from the concern of trip length toward maximum

student benefit, Brecht and Walton (1994) argue that to achieve the greatest success for participating students, study abroad administrators need to address program design, management, assessment, and standards, especially, pre-departure orientation and foreign language requirements. Further, Kitsantas (2004) believes a need exists for cross-cultural training prior to study abroad trips. Inglis, Rolls, and Kristy (1998), however, note that many of these claims and criticisms are based on unreliable evidence. Thus, more research is called for in the area of studying abroad to confirm that participants are obtaining the maximum potential benefits offered through the experience.

This research focuses mainly on prior claims by Dwyer (2004), who argues that study abroad programs impact students' lives based primarily on the *duration* of the program. Dwyer concludes that the longer the program, the more significant the impact. Our research goes beyond duration and examines multiple variables that influence just how study abroad programs impact students' futures. Through understanding the potential benefits of studying abroad, educators and administrators will be better able to create programs that encourage and benefit students in their lives after graduation.

In an effort to better understand the effectiveness of study abroad programs and to provide direction toward improvement for programs, this research undertook a case study of the effectiveness of study abroad programs at Western Michigan University (hereafter referred to as "Western"). Western has an enrollment of almost 25,000 students with 48% men and 52% women. The university hosts 140 undergraduate programs, 67 Master's programs, 1 specialist program, and 29 Doctoral programs housed in 9 colleges spread across 8 branch campuses. Along with a diverse international student population, Western also hosts over 60 study abroad programs in almost two dozen countries, thus, providing students with diverse opportunities to study abroad all over the world (HIGE, 2012).

### *Research on Study Abroad Programs and Factors Influencing Program Effects*

Dwyer (2004) points out several considerations that researchers should take into account before conducting research to assess the impact of study abroad programs; for example, findings from researchers' data are more reliable if a standardized methodology is employed, such as pre-test and post-test interviews and surveys. Dwyer (2004) cites an example of longitudinal research by the International Education of Students (IES) [a non-profit organization that regularly conducts surveys to gauge the success of their programs]

that measured variables, such as: the number of years of data, the number of different locations, the variety of academic models and housing arrangements used, and the size of the alumni pool. Therefore, this data allowed the IES to isolate and assess the longitudinal impact of specific program components for large enough sample sizes to make the results statistically valid and reliable (Dwyer, 2004, p. 153). Because few organizations have comprehensive data on variables mentioned above, however, many studies produce statistically unreliable results. It also is important to understand the time period of the sample because, depending on the range of years examined, some people will not have had access to the Internet or the knowledge of how to use this medium to complete an online survey (Dwyer, 2004).

Unlike most independent studies that have employed small sample sizes, Dwyer developed a study using 50 years of data provided by IES which routinely surveys study abroad participants both before and after their experiences, then uses the data to analyze the effects of its programs. In addition to the IES variables, Dwyer (2004, p. 152) also incorporated survey questions that related to specific program features including: "language study, housing choice, duration of study, enrollment in foreign university courses, and participation in an internship or field of study." From 3,723 responses, Dwyer found that students studying abroad for one full year were more likely to benefit academically, culturally, personally, and professionally from their study abroad experience.

An independent nonprofit organization started in 1919, the Institute of International Education (IIE) is one of the largest and most influential study abroad companies in the United States (IIE, n.d.). The annual report published by the IIE, *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange*, "releases new statistics and analysis of international and U.S. students flows based on a survey of accredited U.S. higher education institutions" (IIE, 2008, p. 6). Data from *Open Doors* indicates a steep increase in the number of students overall studying abroad between 1987 and 2008, and reports that, "262,416 U.S. students studied abroad for academic credit in 2007/08, an increase of 8.5% over the previous year [and overall,] U.S. student participation has more than tripled over the past two decades" (IIE, 2009, p. 2) (Figure 1). Thus, U.S. study abroad programs have incurred 20 years of continuous expansion allowing this experience to be more than just a "junior year abroad" phenomenon.

Insight from Dwyer's (2004) research questions: "How are students benefitting from study abroad programs?" and "Does participation in these programs affect future career goals?" indicated a significant career impact on study abroad participants, particularly for full-year program attendees (70%) (Table 1). Dwyer (2004) also found that the question of study abroad program

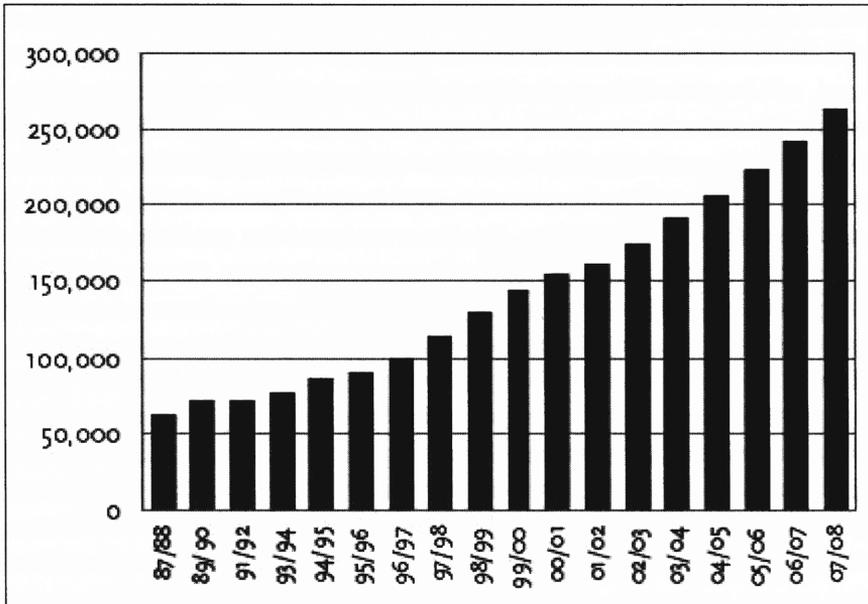


Figure 1. U.S. students studying abroad, 1987 – 2008 (Source: IIE, 2009, p. 2).

placement in one's college career was imperative to future career choices. She observed that if the change of interest occurred late in the college career, the possibility existed of prolonging graduation for the program participant. Thus, because students' career directions are influenced by their study abroad programs, this supports the belief that the study abroad experience should be promoted earlier than one's junior year in college; however, currently, the junior year is generally the case. The same holds true for several of the choices including acquired skill sets that influenced the career path or caused dramatic changes in the career paths.

Dwyer also researched the perception that increased personal growth could be gained by participants in study abroad programs. Again, Dwyer emphasizes duration (Table 2) indicating that full year programs do have better results and students who study abroad for a full year have more time to develop personal growth than students who participate in semester or summer term programs. While some of the variables received similar scores (increased self-confidence, increased maturity, lasting impact on world view), it was clear from Dwyer's findings that students should take the time to study abroad for a full year.

**Table 1.***Career impact by study abroad term length (Source: Dwyer, 2004, p. 159).*

<b>Survey Item</b>	<b>Full Year</b>	<b>Fall Semester</b>	<b>Spring Semester</b>	<b>Summer Term</b>	<b>Total</b>
Engaged in international work/volunteerism since studying abroad	57%	42%	47%	38%	48%
Acquired skill sets that influenced career path	82%	73%	74%	71%	76%
Established relationships abroad that became professional contacts	7%	3%	5%	1%	5%
Ignited an interest in a career direction	70%	57%	59%	59%	62%
Enhanced abilities to speak a foreign language which they utilize in the workplace	72%	60%	61%	67%	65%
Influenced them to get a job overseas	21%	12%	17%	10%	17%
Influenced decision to work for a multi-national organization in the US	16%	12%	16%	9%	14%
Caused changes in career paths	18%	10%	10%	6%	12%

Study abroad has many different effects on students at the college level (Table 2). Even though a full year provides more personal development, semester or summer term programs also appear to have an influence. Thus, the majority of all students studying abroad for any length of time reported improvement in personal development. This alone should help educators realize the power of studying abroad.

From Dwyer's conclusions, it appears that longer study abroad programs, such as one full year, result in maximum benefits for those involved; however, for intermediate and shorter periods of time (e.g., semester versus summer), students who participated in summer programs do gain just as much as those who participated in semester programs. Is it possible that the intensity of the summer program allows a student to work harder and experience more because of the limited amount of time available for studying abroad in the summer months?

**Table 2.**

*Personal growth by study abroad term length (Source: Dwyer, 2004, p. 160).*

Survey Item	Full Year	Fall Semester	Spring Semester	Summer Term	Total
Increased Self-Confidence	98%	95%	96%	97%	96%
Enabled me to tolerate ambiguity	92%	87%	88%	88%	89%
Served as a catalyst for increased maturity	98%	97%	97%	95%	97%
Caused me to change/refine political and social views	89%	84%	80%	76%	84%
Continues to influence political and social awareness	91%	86%	85%	86%	88%
Continues to influence participation in community organizations	71%	65%	62%	67%	66%
Continues to influence the choices made in family life	78%	72%	69%	70%	73%
Has had a lasting impact on world view	97%	95%	94%	92%	95%
Still in contact with US friends met while studying abroad	63%	47%	50%	26%	52%

Program design (or lack of design) is extremely important to the marketing and success of each study abroad program. Numerous arguments exist pertaining to how a study abroad program should be developed, as well as, when and where it should fit into the college curriculum. Some researchers feel newer and better approaches might be available for making study abroad programs more beneficial (Brecht & Walton, 1994; Hess 1982; King & Young, 1994; Kitsantas, 2004; Metzler, 2000; Teichler & Steube, 1991). Metzler (2000, p. 16) notes four different types of study abroad programs: academic year, semester, summer/winter, and collaborative short-term programs. Many researchers believe a longer duration abroad is better for the students (Dwyer, 2004; Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Hadis, 2005) including Dwyer’s (2004, p. 151) claim that “the longer students study abroad the more significant the academic, cultural development, and personal growth benefits.”

While there has been a steady increase in the number of overall study abroad students, students studying abroad for a full year dropped from 17.7% in 1985-86 to 7.8% in 2001-02 (Dwyer, 2004). Overall, there has been a steady decline in the number of students participating in a full year study abroad program with the IES. In just five decades, participation fell from a high of 72% to 20% (Figure 2).

Semester programs (Fall or Spring) are becoming more popular with students than the full academic year. Semester programs also allow universities to create an internship program, which some educators believe would fit better in a shorter stay. Summer/Winter programs are usually five or six weeks long and take place in between semesters. These programs are often more appropriate for students who cannot take time out of their college program to spend a semester or a full year abroad. Collaborative short-term programs are nontraditional study abroad opportunities with students studying in a foreign country under the instruction of their home university professors. Designed to be more of a travel-based program, these programs allow more freedom for the students and professors accompanying them instead of the demands of the curriculum of a foreign university.

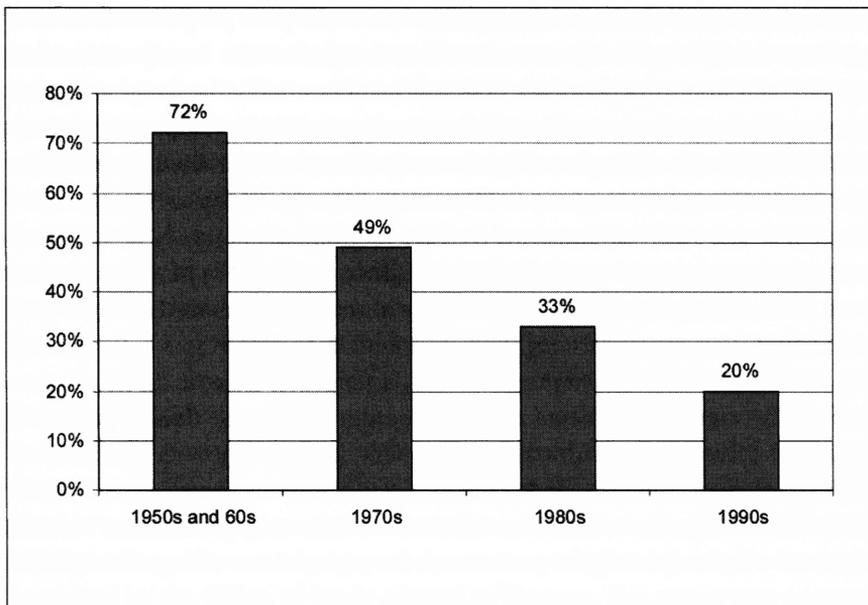


Figure 2. Percentage of IES students studying abroad for a full year, by decade (Source: Dwyer, 2004, p. 152).

Regardless of length of time, one of the main objectives for students in joining study abroad programs is to enhance cross-cultural skills whereby, “cross-cultural training usually includes the awareness of culture and cultural differences, factual knowledge necessary for adjustment, challenges to people’s emotional balance that unavoidable intercultural experiences bring, and opportunities to practice skills and behaviors that can assist people’s adjustment” (Kitsantas, 2004, p. 442). Furthermore, taking courses prior to study abroad allows students to be better prepared for their program in particular, foreign language courses, or geography courses of the region they are visiting (Puck, Kittler, & Wright, 2008, p. 2184). With burgeoning globalization and internationalization, cross-cultural skills are extremely important; and, thus, participation in a study abroad program allows for full immersion into another culture.

## Methods

While this research focuses on Western’s study abroad programs, it highlights concerns for all programs. We take the general idea for our questions from Dwyer’s (2004) study; however, unlike Dwyer, we do not emphasize duration, that is, the effects of semester versus full year programs. Informed by Dwyer’s (2004, p. 161) research which concluded that “study abroad has a significant impact on students in the areas of continued language use, academic attainment measures, intercultural and personal development, and career choices, but most importantly, the study illustrates that this impact can be sustained over a period as long as 50 years,” we assessed the lasting effects of Western’s and other affiliated universities’/organizations’ study abroad programs by examining 10 years (Fall 2001 – Summer II 2009) of data collected from past participants in Western’s study abroad programs. Aiming to provide administrators at Western with information to better assess the lasting effects of their study abroad programs for participants, we articulated whether statistically significant effects existed regarding language fluency and use, academic achievement, cultural development, personal growth, satisfaction of the participant and area, and professional attainment, as well as, how their study abroad experience influenced their lives following graduation. We also observed whether participant preferences for regions have changed over time.

*Case Study of Western Michigan University's Study Abroad Programs*

The Haenicke Institute for Global Education (HIGE) at Western sponsors and maintains efforts related to “globalization and internationalization of the academic environment” (HIGE, 2012). Activities and responsibilities include: International Partnerships, Academic Programs, Faculty Development, International Students, Study Abroad, Immigration and Travel, Council for Institutional Diversity and Multiculturalism, and Community Outreach (HIGE, 2012). This study addresses the management of programs that offer study abroad opportunities for interested students. Ranging in duration from just a few weeks to a full academic year, a selection of more than 60 programs are offered to both undergraduate and graduate students in good academic standing; these are either Western programs or other programs that have been evaluated by HIGE staff and deemed appropriate. Annually, Western sends more than 500 students to programs distributed across 35-plus countries.

After each study abroad program, the Western Michigan University Office of Study Abroad conducts a post-trip survey evaluation that asks participants basic questions pertaining to motivation, pre-departure orientation, the program itself, transportation, packing, housing, budget, academic culture, and how their Office of Study Abroad could improve its services. Two questions are also asked about what the students found challenging during their study abroad, and what the greatest benefit was from the experience. This survey assists the staff in understanding how they might improve their study abroad programs, but barely touches on the benefits to students. It is not only important to understand the short-term benefits of study abroad programs, but administrators should be able to disclose the long-term benefits of a study abroad program after students have left the university. Without a long-term analysis, the office cannot confidently say whether a study abroad program has a lasting, significant impact on its participants.

*Data Collection*

Data for this research came from a list of Western alumni who participated in a study abroad program at some point in their college career. E-mail addresses from 10 years of past participants were obtained through a database developed by the Office of Study Abroad at Western. The survey was adapted from the International Education of Students' “Abroad 2002 IES 50-Year Survey” instrument. The Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) at Western approved the research design and revised survey instrument.

Names, permanent addresses, and e-mail addresses were retrieved for the population of 3,710 students from the study abroad database. The list, including those particular to Western Michigan University WIN numbers, was run through the alumni database in order to ensure that the e-mail addresses were updated. An account was then created and opened on "Survey Monkey," an online survey tool, after the final name list was received on October 19, 2009. The participants were contacted through e-mail with a link to the survey; data collection was closed on December 1, 2009.

Of the 3,710 e-mail addresses, 1,972 were current e-mail addresses, 1,130 did not work or were expired, 279 were duplicate addresses, and 329 were not included because of the fact that these students completed their study abroad assignment after Spring 2009. When all data had been collected from the online survey, a 20.7% response rate was achieved (408 respondents, of which 405 were valid) after factoring in the undeliverable surveys because of outdated addresses.

The survey instrument, containing 22 questions (Appendix A), included specific questions on motivation, how study abroad influenced academic choices, career choices, personal/social development, and lives overall, including when, where, and how long they participated, internship and field placements, encouragement of travel, and basic demographic characteristics. The variables comprising *academic choices*, *career choices*, and *personal/social development* were answered using a Likert scale (0 = Not Applicable, 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Each of these measures contained several statements (Appendix A).

## Analysis

Data were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 17.0) for performing descriptive statistics and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests to analyze the study questions. ANOVA was used to compare the different categories related to academic choices, career choices, and the personal/social development variables. Participants chose their degree of satisfaction to each one of the variables on a scale of 0 to 5. All of the results reported are statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

*Descriptive Statistics: Participation, Duration, and Region of Choice*

Overall, there were 262 (64.7%) females and 139 (34.3%) males who completed the survey, four participants did not reveal their gender. Further analysis revealed that no particular region was more dominantly studied by males instead of females and the African region had an equal number of respondents for males and females.

The majority of respondents (47.2%) studied abroad between the years 2007 and 2009. It was not surprising to see a decline for a few reasons; primarily, the further back the graduation date, the less likely the e-mail addresses were current, so the sample is biased in this regard. It was surprising to have received four responses from participants who studied abroad before 2000; those participants may have had an extremely memorable experience that prompted them to respond to the online survey in a positive or negative way.

The sample of Western's study abroad participants was grouped into eight regions based on the region classification used by IIE. The majority of respondents (57.5%) studied abroad in Europe which includes Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Spain, Turkey, United Kingdom, Sweden, Denmark, and Scotland. Of the 77 study abroad programs offered by Western, 37 were European-based. Latin America was the second most attended study abroad region with 15.1% of respondents, and 9.9% traveled to Asia and Oceania. Africa was visited by 5.9% of participants.

Between the three regions, there were 28 programs. The Middle East, North America, and Multi-Destination programs had the fewest number of respondents. It was important to remember that Western is affiliated with several study abroad programs at other universities and independent organizations. Out of 405 responses, 15 programs were listed that were either offered through another university, offered by an independent organization, or were no longer offered through Western.

Corresponding to current arguments related to the *optimum duration* of study abroad programs (Dwyer 2004), it was not surprising to observe that many students were choosing programs that were short-term, especially during the summer. At the same time, it is important to note that while over a third (35.3%) of respondents attended programs offered during the summer, the majority of students (52.8%) still preferred to study abroad during Spring and Fall semesters. Only 7.2% of respondents studied abroad for a full academic year, and 1.5% of respondents reported choosing programs that were either Spring/Summer or Summer/Fall. Out of 77 programs reported, 24 were single semes-

ter programs, 28 were summer programs, 9 were yearlong programs, 11 were offered with multiple durations, and 5 programs did not articulate the duration.

### *Motivation for Studying Abroad*

Participants were asked to report on their initial motivation for studying abroad by choosing one or more of the following reasons:

1. To meet people from other cultures and backgrounds.
2. To learn more about yourself and who you are.
3. To gain new insights and outlooks through new relationships.
4. To improve your professional and financial potential.
5. To learn a language in a country where it is spoken.
6. To explore your heritage.
7. To gain a new perspective on your own country.
8. To see the world and broaden your experiences.

Approximately 91% of the respondents said their motivation for studying abroad was to “see the world and broaden their experiences,” while 83% said that they wanted to “meet people from other cultures and backgrounds;” and, 70% wanted to “learn more about themselves and who they are.” Four of the statements had roughly the same response rate with 53% who wanted to “learn a language in a country where it is spoken,” and 52% hoped to “gain new insights and outlooks through new relationships.” Forty-seven percent wanted to “improve their professional and financial potential,” and 40% wanted to “gain a new perspective on their own country.” “Exploring their heritage” received the lowest response rate at 14%.

### *Long-term Influence on Participants' Lives*

Participants were then asked if their study abroad experience influenced their lives in any of the following ways:

1. Developed a more sophisticated way of looking at the world.
2. Changed my career paths.
3. Influenced me to work for a multi-national organization in the U.S.
4. Influenced me to get a job overseas.
5. Influenced me to explore other cultures.

6. Sparked an interest in travel.
7. Opened up an interest/passion for another language and/or culture.
8. Established relationships that became professional contacts.
9. Met host country friends with whom I maintain contact.
10. Met U.S. friends with whom I maintain contact.
11. Met my spouse or life partner there.

The participants were once again asked to choose more than one statement that applied to their experience. The most frequently selected statement was “sparked an interest in travel” (83%). Participants were also highly “influenced to get a job overseas” (76%), and reported that they “developed a more sophisticated way of looking at the world” (74%). Almost three-fourths “met U.S. friends with whom they still maintain contact” (73%), and over two-thirds said that study abroad “opened up an interest/passion for another language and/or culture” (69%). And finally, about three-fourths said that the experience changed their “way of looking at the world” (74%).

Studying abroad was less likely to “influence participants to change their career path” (14%), which most likely meant that the guiding principle for attending study abroad programs was to help them accomplish their degree and earn credits towards their majors/minors.

### *Participants' Academic and Personal/Social Satisfaction by Travel to World Regions*

Regarding differences between world regions where participants have traveled, Table 3 gives a statistical mean (from the aforementioned Likert scale of 0-5) for level of satisfaction on a particular measure for that location. Students attending Latin American programs expressed the highest satisfaction as it reinforced their commitment to *foreign language* study (mean = 4.13) and enhanced their *ability to speak a language* other than English that they have utilized in a work place setting (mean = 3.84). Students who participated in African programs reported the highest satisfaction in improving their *self-confidence* (mean = 4.63), while students attending European programs reported the highest satisfaction in gaining a new and on-going *appreciation for the arts* (mean = 3.93). Students who participated in Oceania programs reported the highest satisfaction in continuing to influence their *decisions in their family life* (mean = 3.74).

To determine whether there were statistically significant differences within and between these means of academic and personal/social develop-

ment with respect to regions traveled to, ANOVA tests were performed. [The regions of North America, Middle East, and Multi-destination were excluded because of the lack of travel by participants, although the authors believed that students who chose those areas were highly motivated to travel there and, thus, might have been more positive towards their trips.] Five of the variables indicated statistically significant scores across the regions (Table 4): “reinforced my commitment to foreign language study” ( $F = 22.39, p < 0.001$ ), “enhanced my ability to speak a language other than English which I have utilized in a work setting” ( $F = 21.03, p < 0.001$ ), “increased my self-confidence” ( $F = 4.64, p = 0.001$ ), “gave me a new and on-going appreciation of the arts” ( $F = 3.61, p < 0.01$ ), and “continues to influence my choices I make in my family life” ( $F = 2.72, p < 0.05$ ).

The mean differences for Oceania programs were significant when compared to all other regions for statements: “reinforced my commitment to foreign language study” and “enhanced my ability to speak a language other than English which I have utilized in a work setting.” Oceania programs recorded a significantly lower mean compared to all other regions and is most likely because English is the primary language of New Zealand and Australia. A statistically significant mean was reported when Latin American programs were compared to Africa and Europe in regards to the same two statements. Latin American programs recorded a significantly higher mean when compared to Europe and Africa that is certainly because of the Spanish/Portuguese influence.

Students who participated in Asian programs reported significant mean differences for “increased self-confidence” when compared to all other regions. Asian programs recorded a significantly lower mean when compared to all other regions. Comparing Latin American and Oceania programs to European programs, a significant mean was reported for the statement, “gave me a new and on-going appreciation of the arts” when compared to Latin America and Oceania. European programs reported a significantly higher mean when compared to Latin American and Oceania programs. African programs had a significantly lower mean for “continues to influence my choices I make in my family life” when compared to all the other regions.

### *Participants' Career Choices by Travel to World Regions*

Turning to the differences among world regions where the study abroad experience was located and participants' career choices (Table 5), the results revealed that students who attended Latin American programs expressed the

Table 3.

*Means of satisfaction measures by travel to world regions.*

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Reinforced my commitment to foreign language study	Africa	24	3.00	2.187
	Asia	40	3.60	1.865
	Europe	233	3.22	1.985
	Latin America	61	<b>4.13</b>	1.455
	Oceania	38	0.66	1.072
	Total	396	3.14	2.034
	Enhanced my ability to speak a language other than English which I have utilized in a work setting	Africa	24	2.00
Asia		39	3.00	1.987
Europe		231	2.65	1.905
Latin America		61	<b>3.84</b>	1.529
Oceania		38	0.55	0.978
Total		393	2.63	1.957
Increased my self-confidence		Africa	24	<b>4.63</b>
	Asia	40	3.83	1.107
	Europe	233	4.33	0.865
	Latin America	60	4.50	0.873
	Oceania	38	4.34	0.745
	Total	395	4.32	0.885
	Gave me a new and on-going appreciation of the arts	Africa	24	3.46
Asia		40	3.63	1.295
Europe		233	<b>3.93</b>	1.262
Latin America		61	3.41	1.309
Oceania		38	3.37	1.051
Total		396	3.73	1.264
Continues to influence my choices I make in my family life		Africa	24	2.79
	Asia	40	3.70	1.224
	Europe	233	3.41	1.327
	Latin America	61	3.64	1.170
	Oceania	38	<b>3.74</b>	1.288
	Total	396	3.47	1.316

highest satisfaction regarding the following statement: “enhancing their ability to speak a language other than English which they have utilized in a work setting” (mean = 3.84), while participants in Oceania programs reported the lowest values for this scale (mean = 0.55). This most likely may be attributed to the high number of non-English speaking programs in Latin America, while

**Table 4.**

*ANOVA results for mean differences on measures of satisfaction by travel to world regions.*

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Reinforced my commitment to foreign language study	Between Groups	304.583	4	76.146	22.394	0.000***
	Within Groups	1329.498	391	3.400		
	Total	1634.081	395			
Enhanced my ability to speak a language other than English which I have utilized in a work setting	Between Groups	267.662	4	66.916	21.034	0.000***
	Within Groups	1234.353	388	3.181		
	Total	1502.015	392			
Increased my self-confidence	Between Groups	14.015	4	3.504	4.640	0.001***
	Within Groups	294.506	390	0.755		
	Total	308.522	394			
Gave me a new and on-going appreciation of the arts	Between Groups	22.470	4	5.617	3.608	0.007**
	Within Groups	608.689	391	1.557		
	Total	631.159	395			
Continues to influence my choices I make in my family life	Between Groups	18.515	4	4.629	2.717	0.030*
	Within Groups	666.058	391	1.703		
	Total	684.573	395			

Significance Levels: \*\*\*.001, \*\*.01, \*.05

the other regions offer several programs in English. The other two variables were based on “yes” or “no” responses from the participants with 1 representing “yes” and 0 representing “no.” Students attending Asian programs were “influenced to get a job overseas” (mean = 0.56) while responses from the other four regions had less than a 0.50 mean. None of the participants responded over the 0.50 range regardless of region for “changing their career path,” however, participants in African programs reported the highest average of yes responses (mean = 0.33) (Table 5).

To observe whether any statistically significant differences existed in mean career choices with respect to regions traveled to, ANOVA was used to compare responses to seven statements:

Table 5.

*Means of career choice measures by travel to world regions.*

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Enhanced my ability to speak a language other than English which I have utilized in a work setting	Africa	24	2.00	1.794
	Asia	39	3.00	1.987
	Europe	231	2.65	1.905
	Latin America	61	<b>3.84</b>	1.529
	Oceania	38	0.55	0.978
	Total	393	2.63	1.957
Influenced me to get a job overseas	Africa	24	0.38	0.495
	Asia	39	<b>0.56</b>	0.502
	Europe	230	0.29	0.455
	Latin America	61	0.21	0.413
	Oceania	37	0.22	0.417
	Total	391	0.30	0.461
Changed my career paths	Africa	24	<b>0.33</b>	0.482
	Asia	39	0.26	0.442
	Europe	230	0.10	0.306
	Latin America	61	0.15	0.358
	Oceania	37	0.14	0.347
	Total	391	0.14	0.351

1. Ignited my interest in career decisions that I pursued after the experience.
2. Enhanced my ability to speak a language other than English which I have used in a workplace setting.
3. Provided me an internship experience that shaped my career choices.
4. Allowed me to acquire skill sets that influenced my career path.
5. Influenced me to get a job overseas.
6. Influenced me to work for a multi-national organization in the U.S.
7. Changed my career path.

ANOVA analysis for career choices variables were statistically significant among the statements “enhanced my ability to speak a language other than English which I have utilized in a work setting” ( $F = 21.03, p < 0.001$ ), “influenced me to get a job overseas” ( $F = 4.37, p < 0.01$ ), and “changed my

career paths" ( $F = 3.58, p < 0.01$ ) (Table 6). No statistically significant differences existed among the remaining four variables.

Overall, the mean differences for Latin American and Oceania programs were statistically significant when compared to all other world regions regarding the statement: "enhanced my ability to speak a language other than English which I have utilized in a work setting." The means were significantly higher for the Latin American programs, while the means were significantly lower for the Oceania programs. The mean differences for Asian programs were statistically significant when compared to European, Latin American, and Oceania programs in regards to the statement: "influenced me to get a job overseas." The means were significantly higher for the Asian programs. The mean differences for African programs were statistically significant when compared to European, Latin American, and Oceania programs in regards to the statement: "changed my career path." The means were significantly higher for the African programs in this area.

#### *Other Study Abroad Influences: Internships, Field Placements, Influence on Major/Minor, and Volunteering*

Respondents were asked if they participated in an internship or field placement while on their study abroad experience (Questions 11 and 12, Appendix A), and, if so, did that experience assist or influence their career, the assumption being that the number of study abroad programs that offer an internship or field placement would vary depending on the location. Some study abroad locations did not offer internships or field placements. Forty-eight respondents said that they did participate in an internship or field placement (Table 7). Of those 48 respondents, 37 found their experience helpful (Table 8). One of two things may be speculated from this; either the internships or field placements at some locations are not helpful to the participants' career or participants are willingly doing an internship for credit. Determining this, however, is outside the scope of this research.

Participants were also if asked they changed their major or minor after their study abroad experience (Question 22, Appendix A). While 318 (78.5%) respondents reported that they did not change their major or minor based on their experience, 84 (20.7%) reported they did change their major or minor after studying abroad (Table 9). Further, out of 87 who responded to the open-ended question by saying "yes" or "no" to changing their major or minor, 31 respondents reported they *changed their minor to a major* because of credits earned on study abroad; 26 stated they *added a major or minor* after study

**Table 6.**

*ANOVA results for mean differences of career choice measures by travel to world regions.*

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Enhanced my ability to speak a language other than English which I have utilized in a work setting	Between Groups	267.662	4	66.916	21.034	0.000***
	Within Groups	1234.353	388	3.181		
	Total	1502.015	392			
Influenced me to get a job overseas	Between Groups	3.585	4	.896	4.369	0.002**
	Within Groups	79.197	386	0.205		
	Total	82.783	390			
Changed my career paths	Between Groups	1.718	4	.430	3.584	0.007**
	Within Groups	46.261	386	0.120		
	Total	47.980	390			

Significance Levels: \*\*\*.001, \*\*.01, \*.05

**Table 7.**

*Participation in an internship or field placement.*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	48	11.9	11.9	11.9
	No	357	88.1	88.1	100.0
Total		405	100.0	100.0	

abroad; 20 indicated that they *changed their mind completely* about their major or minor, and *selected another course of study*. Of those twenty, however, two stated that they changed their major or minor, for reasons not related to their study abroad experience, two stated their experience influenced them to go to graduate school, and six said that they did not change their major or minor. One of the participants who changed their minor to a major because of the

Table 8.

*Experience of an internship assisted or influenced career.*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	37	9.1	77.1	77.1
	No	11	2.7	22.9	100.0
	Total	48	11.9	100.0	
Missing	System	357	88.1		
Total		405	100.0		

number of credits earned stated, “Had I not decided to study in Spain, I probably would have just minored in Spanish, but since it offered a lot of upper-level credits it just made sense to major.” Two of the participants who changed their mind completely had similar views stating, “I lost respect for some of the teachers in the International and Global Studies track and switched out to religion;” and, “No longer pursued Japanese as I was discouraged by the experience.” Two of the participants who said they did not change their major or minor stated, “My major didn’t change. However, my experience strongly influenced my desires to pursue a Masters;” and, “No, but my study abroad experience impacted my minor. Being in Europe gave me greater insight with regards to past events, and the shaping of American history and culture as it stands today. I am a better history teacher because of it.” We find it interesting that 20.7% of respondents did decide to change their major or minor because the assumption is that the percentage would have been lower because typically study abroad is completed during the junior year of a student’s academic program and during this time, usually few changes are made towards majors and minors. It is possible that more students might be participating in study abroad programs earlier in their education giving them the option of changing their majors or minors depending on their experiences.

Respondents were also asked if they had ever worked or volunteered in an international capacity since college graduation. Because 21.2% of respondents had not graduated from college and 38.8% had recently graduated, only 141 participants responded to this question. Fifty-six of the 141 respondents worked as a teacher or an educator since graduation, 36 respondents worked as “volunteers for a non-profit agency,” 35 worked

**Table 9.***Change in major or minor after study abroad experience.*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	84	20.7	20.9	20.9
	No	318	78.5	79.1	100.0
	Total	402	99.3	100.0	
Missing	System	3	0.7		
Total		405	100.0		

for a “non-profit organization,” and 33 worked for a “private industry.” Thirteen respondents worked for the U.S. government, eleven worked as a “consultant,” four worked in an “international admissions office,” two worked for an “international organization,” two worked for the “American Red Cross or AmeriCorps,” and two worked “internationally” (Figure 3).

#### *Year of Travel and Preferred Choice of Region*

The authors compared the initial year abroad and the regional location of the study abroad program to see if there was a preference for a particular world region during that time period (Table 10). Three responses were reported from students who studied abroad before 2000 traveling to programs in Asia, Europe, and Latin America. From before 2000 to 2000-03, there was a 12.9% increase in students traveling to Europe, which continued to increase to 27.2% in 2007-09. We would expect European programs to remain popular throughout the study abroad years included in the study, but while travel to European countries was increasing, so was travel to the remaining four regions. In the 10-year span, African programs increased from zero to 4.1%, Asian programs increased from 0.3% to 4.6%, Latin American programs increased from 0.3% to 8.1%, and Oceania programs increased from zero to 3.6%. It is fair to speculate that more students are branching out and attending programs in countries outside of Europe because of globalization and internationalization. The authors believe citizens in Asia, Latin America, and Oceania that host study abroad programs are becoming more accepting of,

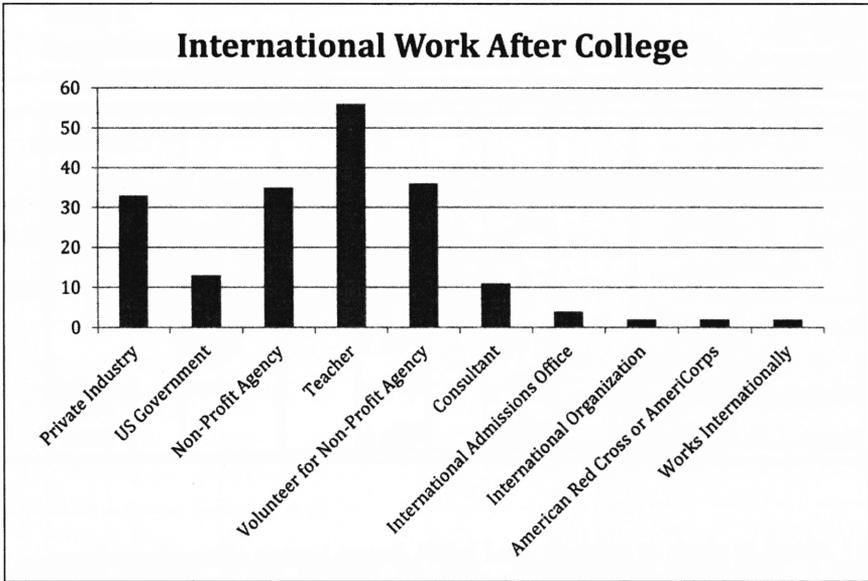


Figure 3. International work after college.

and welcoming to American students, and are demonstrating a desire for these students to learn their culture. This increase in attendance in these locations is showing an increase for tolerance and global understanding of other cultures.

### Conclusion

It is certain that study abroad influences participants' lives after graduation. The most frequently selected statement was "sparked an interest in travel" with 83% of respondents responding positively to this question. Since most participants reported an enjoyable experience, this finding is not surprising; therefore, we conclude that their experience prompted an interest in exploring other cultures. Participants were also highly "influenced to get a job overseas" (76%), "develop a more sophisticated way of looking at the world" (74%), and the study abroad experience allowed them to "meet U.S. friends with whom they maintain contact" (73%), and "opened up an interest/passion for another language and/or culture" (69%). Since the study covered a 10-year span, it is important to look at these four variables, as well. If students who participated in a study abroad program 10 years ago are still reporting how

Table 10.

*Initial year of study abroad region.*

		Region						
		Africa	Asia	Europe	Latin America	Oceania	Total	
Before 2000	Count	0	1	1	1	0	3	
	% of Total	0.0%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.0%	0.8%	
Initial Year of Study Abroad	2000 – 2003	Count	2	2	52	11	15	82
	% of Total	0.5%	0.5%	13.2%	2.8%	3.8%	20.8%	
	2004 – 2006	Count	5	19	73	17	8	122
	% of Total	1.3%	4.8%	18.5%	4.3%	2.0%	31.0%	
	2007 – 2009	Count	16	18	107	32	14	187
	% of Total	4.1%	4.6%	27.2%	8.1%	3.6%	47.5%	
Total	Count	23	40	233	61	37	394	
	% of Total	5.8%	10.2%	59.1%	15.5%	9.4%	100.0%	

much of an impact it made on their lives, it is safe to say that study abroad does produce a significant experience.

Study abroad programs at Western do significantly impact students' futures. Participants in programs located in the Latin American region expressed the highest satisfaction with "reinforcing their commitment to foreign language" and "enhancing their ability to speak a language other than English." Participants in programs located in the African region reported the highest satisfaction in "improving their self-confidence," while participants in programs located in the European region reported the highest satisfaction in "gaining a new and on-going appreciation for the arts." Oceania participants reported the highest satisfaction in "continuing to influence their decisions in their family life." Therefore, we can conclude that while each program location has a different effect on students, each location is likely to be beneficial in its own way.

Significant differences in program satisfaction were also discovered with respect to the duration of a particular program. Students attending spring and summer or summer and fall sessions expressed the highest satisfaction for "influencing their decision to go to graduate school," "influencing them to seek out a greater diversity in friends," "increasing their self-confidence," and "enabling them to learn something new about themselves." Students attending programs with a full academic year duration expressed the highest satisfaction with "acquiring skill sets that influenced their career path." The next highest reported level of satisfaction was with programs that lasted a full semester, which is important because short summer programs are becoming increasingly popular, but many students are not benefiting the most from the experience.

Study abroad experiences did not significantly influence students to change their major or minor. Less than half of the respondents actually answered the question about working in the international sector. Fifty-six of the respondents have worked as teachers or educators, 36 have worked as volunteers for a non-profit agency, 35 have worked for a non-profit organization, and 33 have worked for a private industry. While less than half of the respondents were actually working in the international sector, this is still an important finding because it means study abroad programs are influencing and encouraging participants.

Considering the extensive responses collected, it is certain that students' experiences significantly impacted their lives. Although this research is based on a 20.7% response rate to the online survey, the authors conclude that study abroad programs at Western had a significant impact on these students' lives, an inclination, the authors believe, that extends to other university study abroad programs. Nonetheless, some participants reported lower satisfaction levels depending on the location of their programs, as well as, expressed opinions about their particular study abroad program, and we hope that the findings from our study will shed perspective on those instances, as well. Further, our research may assist study abroad coordinators at Western towards a better understanding of why these differences in satisfaction levels occur and determine what to do about them. While the Study Abroad Office conducts a post-experience survey, it may also be beneficial for participants to be surveyed *before* their departure and, possibly, *during* their study abroad program, too, to detect weaknesses or strengths in the programs in order to determine if any necessary improvements need to be made so that students will receive the most beneficial experience. The authors suggest that the study abroad programs are reviewed on a continual basis.

### *Limitations and Opportunities for Further Study*

Future researchers interested in the impacts of study abroad programs might consider addressing the current location and specific employment of the past participants in order to assess whether these issues correlate to their experiences. If we had asked where participants were currently located as well as their specific job type, then the study might have offered more in-depth information as to the way that studying abroad impacted their lives. Since the research only addressed this briefly, we can only generalize if more participants are working in the international sector. As previously stated, if the addresses were kept up-to-date in the study abroad office, then we may have

been able to contact more participants who studied from 2000 – 2005. Instead, the majority of respondents studied abroad during the past 4-5 years, which means that most of them have not graduated and are not working yet. We also believe that more open-ended questions or possibly a focus group might be able to produce more concrete responses to some of the questions and would allow for the interviewer to ask more questions.

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Appendix A. *Study Abroad Survey – 2009.*

Department of Geography

Principal Investigator: Dr. \_\_\_\_\_

Student Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_

Title: How Study Abroad Programs at \_\_\_\_\_ Impact  
a Student's Future

1. What was your motivation for studying abroad?

(Check all that apply.)

- See the world and broaden your experience
- Gain a new perspective on your own country
- Explore your heritage
- Learn a language in a country where it is spoken
- Improve your professional and financial potential
- Gain new insights and outlooks through new relationships
- Learn more about yourself and who you are
- Meeting people from other cultures and backgrounds

For questions 2 through 4, please use the 5 – N/A scales to the left of each statement below to indicate your level of agreement with each statement about your study abroad experience. Use 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = undecided, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree. Use N/A if the statement does not apply to your experience.

1. My study abroad experience influenced my academic choices in the following ways:

- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Reinforced my commitment to foreign language study
- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Influenced my decision to expand or change academic majors
- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Enhanced my interest in academic study; I returned to the U.S. with a greater vigor for academic pursuits
- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Created my interest in lifelong learning
- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Influenced my subsequent educational experiences
- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Influenced my decision to go to graduate school

2. My study abroad experience influenced my academic choices in the following ways:

- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Reinforced my commitment to foreign language study
- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Influenced my decision to expand or change academic majors
- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Enhanced my interest in academic study; I returned to the U.S. with a greater vigor for academic pursuits
- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Created my interest in lifelong learning
- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Influenced my subsequent educational experiences
- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Influenced my decision to go to graduate school

**3. My study abroad experience influenced my career choices in the following ways:**

- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Ignited my interest in career decisions that I pursued after the experience
- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Enhanced my ability to speak a language other than English which I have utilized in a workplace setting
- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Provided me an internship experience that shaped my career choices
- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Allowed me to acquire skill sets that influenced my career path

**4. My study abroad experience influenced my personall/social development in the following ways:**

- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Allowed me to better understand my own cultural values and biases
- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Influenced me to seek out a greater diversity of friends
- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Increased my self-confidence
- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Enabled me to tolerate ambiguity
- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Enabled me to learn something new about myself
- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Served as a catalyst for increased maturity
- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Caused me to change or refine my political and social views
- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Gave me a new and on-going appreciation of the arts
- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Continues to influence my interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds

- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Continues to influence my political and social awareness
- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Continues to influence my participation in community organizations
- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Continues to influence my choices I make in my family life
- 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Continues to influence my perspective on how I view the world

**5. Did your study abroad experience influence your life in any of the following specific ways? (Check all that apply.)**

- Met my spouse or life partner there
- Met U.S. friends with whom I maintain contact
- Met host country friends with whom I maintain contact
- Established relationships that became professional contacts
- Opened up an interest/passion for another language and/or culture
- Sparked an interest in travel
- Influenced me to explore other cultures
- Influenced me to get a job overseas
- Influenced me to work for a multi-national organization in the U.S.
- Changed my career paths
- Developed a more sophisticated way of looking at the world

**6. In what year did you initially study abroad?**

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**7. In what program and country did you study abroad?**

---

**8. What term did you study abroad with \_\_\_\_\_?**

---

**9. What year did you graduate from \_\_\_\_\_?**

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**10. What type of housing arrangement did you have during your study abroad experience?**

- Home stay with a local family or resident
- Residence hall or dormitory with local students
- Apartment with local students
- Apartment with U.S. students
- Independent housing
- Other. Specify: \_\_\_\_\_

**11. Did you participate in an internship or field placement program during your study abroad experience?**

- Yes. Answer question 12.
- No. Go to question 13.

**12. Did that experience assist you or influence you in your career?**

- Yes
- No

**13. Are you still in contact with any of the host country nationals with whom you shared housing?**

- Yes
- No

**14. How many times have you visited the city or country in which you studied since you completed your program?**

\_\_\_\_\_ (Fill-in Number)

**15. Did your desire to study abroad influence which undergraduate college you attended?**

- Yes
- No

**16. Did your study abroad experience encourage you to travel more?**

- Yes
- No

• If Yes, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

**17. Since college, have you ever worked or volunteered in an international capacity (either for an organization located in a foreign country or in a position in the U.S. that had a specific international component) in any of the following ways? (Check all that apply.)**

As a paid employee in the following sector(s):

- In private industry

- For the U.S. government
- For a non-profit agency or organization
- As a teacher or educator
- As a volunteer for a non-profit agency
- As a consultant
- Other. Specify: \_\_\_\_\_

18. Do you use any language other than English on a regular basis (more than once a month)?

- Yes       No
- If Yes, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

19. What is your gender?

- Female       Male

20. What was your major? \_\_\_\_\_

21. What was your minor? \_\_\_\_\_

22. Did your major or minor change after your experience?

- Yes       No
- If Yes, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

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**Ashley King** is an Admissions Counselor at Saint Mary's College in Notre Dame, IN. She has a M.A. in Geography and Educational Leadership from Western Michigan University.

**Lucius F. Hallett, IV** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography at Western Michigan University. His research interests include the movement of foods, the impact of tourism on the local economies of tourist areas, and the potential for value-added agricultural products from southwestern Michigan.