What motivates students to study abroad?

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For many post-secondary students, the opportunity to study in a different country and learn about a new culture, is an exciting and potentially transformative learning experience. International exchange programs are typically defined as a period of study for either one semester or a year, through a pre-arranged bilateral agreement between the home university and the university where the student plans to study. These programs are supported by many in industry, government, higher education and the general public as a unique and effective opportunity to expose students to different languages, cultures and education systems and develop a variety of intercultural skills. These skills are considered important for future employment and participation in an increasingly diverse and interconnected society.

Our personal study and work abroad experiences combined with our professional work with international students and research on the experience of Canadian students abroad and visiting students to Canada, have reinforced our understanding of the positive effects that these programs can have. Study abroad is not a new phenomenon. Effectively as long as higher education institutions have existed, students have sought out new formal and informal educational and learning opportunities away from their home country. From Erasmus of Rotterdam in the 1500’s or the Grand Tours of Europe in the 1800’s, to a long list of Canadian Rhodes Scholars, there are numerous historical and contemporary examples of study abroad. However, the formal involvement of post-secondary institutions in developing, standardizing and managing study abroad programs is a more recent development. According to most records the first official university-sanctioned study abroad program was conducted by the University of Delaware in 1923. Today, more than 250,000 American students study abroad annually, 300,000 Europeans study within the European Union alone and upwards of 20,000 Canadian students study abroad every year. Increasingly study abroad
programs are designed outside of the more traditional term or, year-long formal bilateral or consortium agreement, as universities and 3rd party organization are develop programs of unique lengths, academic focus, and geographic destinations to meet a rising demand for programs tailored to student schedules, subject interest and budgets.

As participation in study abroad has grown, interest in understanding the benefits, learning outcomes and best practices associated with effective programs has emerged. Scores of research papers, from around the world, employing a variety of methodologies have described the benefits of study abroad in terms of enhanced cross-cultural understanding, second language development, subject matter perspectives, independence and maturity. More recently, research has expanded to examine how these outcomes vary by program length, program of study, location of study and impact on career choices. Irrespective of the focus of the study, nearly all of the research highlights positive correlations between student development and study abroad, with longer durations associated with the most significant development.

However, despite this growth in participation and accompanying research, study abroad still affects only a small percentage of post-secondary students. Most estimates in Canada and the US suggest that about 3% of students will study abroad during their undergraduate program, with slightly higher estimates in Europe. This raises the question of why some students decide to participate in study abroad and others do not. Surprisingly little research has examined the factors that influence students decision to study abroad. The Council on International Educational Exchange notes "while there is a good deal of folk wisdom about what motivates students to go abroad, there is very little hard data" (2006, p.2)

The North American studies that have examined students' motivations to study abroad have found that cross-cultural and academic reasons are the primary factors. Students are strongly motivated by the opportunity to study in a new country, in a new culture where they can learn about their subject matter in a new academic environment. They are motivated to learn, formally and informally, along-side local and other visiting students. Conversely, these studies also note that motivations related to family heritage and personal development is considerably less significant. While previous studies have provided some understanding of motivation; they have typically examined exchange students as a homogenous group. Whereas research on learning outcomes has examined student development in terms of program of study, location of study abroad, language of instruction and social identity, research on motivation typically has not. Our research has begun to examine some of these factors. For example, we have identified that commerce students are motivated more by the possibility of improving career
prospects and studying their subject in another context than are Arts & Science students. Conversely Arts & Science students have a stronger motivation to improve second language skills and learning about the host country and its people. In addition female students had a stronger motivation in nearly all cross-cultural items than male students, while their academic and personal motivations had no significant differences.

Our research also notes that female students are aware of study abroad before they begin university while males learn about the opportunity at university. We have found that students utilize the resources of their home study abroad office and website to learn about the variety of international options available and utilize former study abroad participants, more so than staff, faculty or family, when deciding which programs or schools to apply to. Based on the resources available via their study abroad offices and advice provided by former participants, prospective students are choosing programs based primarily on the specific location (or country) followed closely by university reputation. Factors such as size of institution or city, and cost of living do not appear to have a large impact on the decision where to study abroad.

While the number of students studying abroad is growing, considerable research has identified barriers to participation. A recent Canadian Bureau of International Education study highlighted that while 85% of students were interested in study abroad, only 37% indicated that it was possible for them to study abroad. Most research into barriers published research point to a range of factors including program cost, concerns about receiving credit for courses abroad, possibly delay of graduation and concerns with leaving employment opportunities or family members. The significance of each of these barriers varies from student to student, as do the institutional capability to help students navigate and lessen them.

It is not agreed upon what an optimal participation rate of study abroad participation should be at Canadian post-secondary institutions. However, most international education professionals would agree that more students would like to and should participate in some form of study abroad program. A research agenda which combines deeper understanding of the motivations and goals students have for participating and an educational effort to promote the corresponding benefits of study abroad to students in terms of the positive personal, cultural and academic impact we know is possible can help to increase the number of students involved in these activities. This research can help professional’s better design new study abroad programs and communicate the benefits of participation to students.