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## Students' Perceived Barriers, Benefits & International Programmatic Preferences

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### Abstract

*Study abroad experiences can change college students by contributing to their development of self-awareness, communication skills, and ability to navigate the unknown. The objective of this study was to determine students' perceived barriers, benefits, and preferences for international programs (IP). Undergraduate students in large-enrollment, required courses by major, and all freshman orientation undergraduate courses in Bumpers College were targeted and all grade classifications were represented (n = 672). Based on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = completely disagree to 5 = completely agree), students reported "cost is too high" (M = 3.93, SD = 1.00) and being "too busy with school" (M = 3.54, SD = 1.10) as the barriers keeping them from participating in an IP. Using the same Likert-scale, students reported "socially/culturally learn more about a host country" (M = 4.61, SD = 0.67) and "life-changing opportunity" (M = 4.60, SD = 0.66) as the most influencing benefits. Students were most interested in short-term, faculty-led programs (n = 234, 27.2%) with a length of two to three weeks (n = 224, 30.7%) during summer session I (n = 307, 39.4%). Students reported they would like to learn more information about future IPs through email (n = 278, 34.8%), classroom visits (n = 111, 13.9%), and their academic advisors (n = 108, 13.5%). Assessing student's barriers, benefits, and preferences for IPs will guide Bumpers College program development. It is important to focus IP efforts on students' needs and interests, while also providing meaningful, engaged learning in all environments.*

*Keywords:* agricultural education; barriers and benefits; international programs; study abroad

### **Introduction**

U. S. Colleges of Agriculture have increased efforts towards internationalization of curriculum in order to prepare students to work in an increasingly interdependent world (McGowan, 2007). It has also been frequently mentioned that society is becoming even more interconnected as a result of advancements in transportation, communication, international trade, and changes in the cultural makeup of societies (Place, Irani, Friedel, & Lundy, 2004). International experiences have been described as a means for institutions of higher education to promote globalization of curriculum and promote the communication and understanding of real-world issues (Snyder, Mickelbart, & Eylands, 2012).

Globalization affects current and future agriculture students in their personal and professional lives (Change et al., 2013). Students' personal lives are influenced with an opportunity to learn about other people, embrace their own culture, explore the world, and escape the perception that "their" country is the center of the universe (McGowan, 2007). Furthermore, Zhai and Scheer (2001) stated that students reported changes in their global perspective, attitudes towards cultural diversity, and self-efficacy after participating in an international experience. "The benefits of a global education are diverse and have included understanding new markets for farms, ensuring food safety, preserving environmental resources and promoting healthy families" (Selby, Peters, Sammons, Branson, & Balschweid, 2005, p. 19). Lockett, Moore, and Wingenbach (2014) outlined strategies for Extension to place more emphasis on the importance of international experiences and Ludwig (2002) stated a globally minded Extension workforce occurs when personnel have

participated in formal university study abroad programs.

Students gain professional benefits by entering a career with a global perspective and have an advantage over their counterparts who have not experienced life abroad (McGowan, 2007). Of 956 students surveyed at Texas A&M University, 70% of those students believed that international experiences would increase their competitiveness (Briers, Shinn, & Nguyen, 2010). In addition, a positive correlation was found between students' willingness to participate in an international program (IP) and their beliefs that participating in a program would improve their competitiveness in the global marketplace (Briers, Shinn, & Nguyen, 2010).

Education abroad is a desirable part of the college experience for U.S. students, but with every field there are always new trends along with new challenges (Hulstrand, 2006). One of the most significant developments in recent international programs was the increase in short-term programs offered by U.S. colleges (Hulstrand, 2006). Short-term programs are an important alternative for students that would not participate in semester-long or yearlong IPs (Lewis & Nisenbaum, 2005). Edgar et al. (2018) reported that 71% of students surveyed were interested in short-term, faculty-led programs. However, many semester-length and longer programs are meant to be immersive and designed to eliminate "cultural bubbles" by incorporating volunteerism, service-learning, internships, and homestay experiences, which have well documented benefits (Anderson, 2019). As with most trends, people wonder, is it only a trend or is this a change in IPs that will proceed for decades (Hulstrand, 2006).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research built on previous work that examined perceived barriers to IP participation, perceived benefits to IP participation, and preferred programmatic preferences (Estes, Hansen, & Edgar, 2016; Edgar, Edgar, Caillouet, & Dobbins, 2018). The Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) guided this and previous studies. SCT focuses on human behavior perpetuated by continued motivation and regulation of self-influences (Bandura, 1991). Furthermore, SCT has analyzed social diffusion in terms of psychosocial factors as well as sociocognitive factors which inform, enable, motivate, and guide participants (Bandura, 2001). Bandura (2001) described human decision making capabilities which depends upon neurophysiological mechanisms: generative symbolization, forethought, evaluative self-regulation, reflective self-consciousness, and symbolic communication. SCT provides an explanation for learning by expressing that individuals should possess symbolizing and forethought capability, as well as self-regulatory and self-reflective capabilities, when engaging in the learning process (Bandura, 1986). The symbolizing and forethought capabilities are especially important for students deciding whether to participate in IPs, they help the student assign meaning to an experience as well as think about potential consequences of actions before engaging in such behaviors (Estes et al., 2016).

### **Purpose & Objectives**

IP offices are an essential partner for the globalization efforts of colleges of agriculture (Etling & Barbuto, 2002). Although they serve as the doorway from the university to international opportunities they can make collaboration flow freely or create unnecessary barriers (Etling & Barbuto, 2002). The Graduate School and

International Education strategic plan at the University of Arkansas aimed to increase the percentage of graduating seniors who have completed an international experience to 25% by 2020 (University of Arkansas, 2016). However, to reach the goals outlined by the University of Arkansas, assessments should be made to ensure IPs are serving to enrich faculty and student educational experiences (Hainline et al., 2018). The purpose of this research was to collect information of students enrolled in Bumpers College courses. In particular, this research aimed to determine students' perceived barriers, benefits, and preferred IP characteristics. This information would be used to better inform future IP development and efforts of the Bumpers College International Programs Office (IPO).

The following objectives guided this study:

1. Describe survey respondents' demographics;
2. Describe students' perceived barriers to participating in an IP;
3. Describe students' perceived benefits to participating in an IP; and
4. Describe students' preferred IP characteristics (program location, program length etc.).

### **Methods**

#### **Data Collection**

This study used descriptive survey methods with primarily undergraduate students enrolled in Fall 2018 Bumpers College courses. The survey population consisted of a random stratified sample of courses by academic level and department (Trochim, 2001). The courses were either large-enrollment or required by major. Also, all freshman orientation undergraduate courses in Bumpers College were included

in the sample. There were 672 students who completed the survey, but not every respondent answered every question. Students not present (no contact) were not calculated in the population because they were not present for the informational presentation. Therefore, researchers were unable to control for non-response. Students were allowed approximately 15 minutes to complete a paper-form instrument and were asked not to complete the survey more than once during the Fall 2018 semester. Survey administration began 22 August 2018, two days after the start of the University of Arkansas Fall semester and lasted approximately five weeks. The number of classroom visits varied per day with approximately 2,135 (potentially duplicate) undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in these 35 courses. Useable data collected from 672 students yielded a response rate of 31.5%. The survey was administered to students either before or during a PowerPoint presentation that described the IPs offered by Bumpers College. Researchers aimed to have surveys completed prior to the presentation. However, due to limited time some students continued to work on the survey after the presentation began. There was variation in when the survey was offered depending on the professor's classroom time allotment. Classroom participants ranged from 10 students per classroom to over 100. In general, larger class enrollments had a larger range in college majors than smaller classrooms.

### **Instrumentation**

Usable data were collected from students using a 12-question, multi-scale instrument modified from previous research by Estes et al. (2016) and Edgar et al. (2018). Participant responses for the barriers and benefits statements were on the five-point Likert-type scale (1 = completely

disagree to 5 = completely agree). However, for IP characteristics students were asked to rank the options (1 = most interested to 6 = least interested or no number to indicate they were not interested at all). Part I of the instrument was an open response question that addressed students' preferred country for an IP location(s). Part II addressed students' barriers to participating in an IP. Part III addressed students' interest, knowledge, and motivation to participate in an IP and Part IV addressed the amount students were willing to pay for participating in an IP. Part V addressed previous IP experience, preferred IP type, preferred IP length, preferred time of year, and academic demographics. The barrier options for this instrument were based on barriers used in research by Wingenbach et al. (2003), Estes et al. (2016), and Edgar et al. (2018). The Part IV question that addressed students' willingness to pay for participating in an IP was changed based on previous research by Edgar et al. (2018). Instead of asking students how much they would be willing to pay, this study modified the survey question and included a specific IP scenario with program type, length, and estimated cost of the program to better understand students' willingness to pay. Face and content validity were deemed acceptable by the Bumpers College IPO Director.

### **Data Analysis**

Cronbach's alpha was used to estimate the reliability for the barriers and benefits constructs, which was found to be acceptable at .791 ( $N = 648$ ) and .862 ( $N = 661$ ), respectively (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Data were analyzed using SPSS to determine frequencies, means, and standard deviations. The researchers calculated the open-response question that addressed students' willingness to pay for an IP and sorted responses into one of the 21 categories. The 21 cost categories were

modified from previous research and determined appropriate for content-related validity by an expert.

### Findings & Results

Students indicated that “cost is too high” was the greatest perceived barrier to participating in an IP ( $M = 3.93$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ )

followed by “too busy with school ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) (see Table 1). Students also stated that “I have a fear of traveling outside of the U.S. was the least perceived barrier to participating in an IP ( $M = 1.69$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ) (see Table 1). These findings were consistent with previous research by Edgar et al. (2018).

Table 1

*Perceived Barriers to Participating in an International Program (IP) (n = 669)*

Barrier statements	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Cost is too high	3.93	1.00
Too busy with school	3.54	1.10
Too busy with work	3.16	1.31
I do not have the language skills needed to be successful abroad	3.07	1.31
There are not enough funding opportunities	3.03	1.09
IP courses do not fit into my degree plan	2.62	1.23
I do not have the skillsets necessary to be successful in an international program	2.14	1.14
I do not have friend/ peer support to participate in an IP	2.06	1.13
I do not have parental support to participate in an IP	2.02	1.16
I do not have academic advisor support to participate in an IP	2.01	1.09
An IP will not have an impact on my future career	2.00	1.09
My academic department does not encourage IP participation	1.91	1.06
I have a fear of traveling outside the U.S.	1.69	1.11
Grand Mean	2.54	0.61

Note: Scale: 1=Completely Disagree, 2=Somewhat Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Somewhat Agree, and 5=Completely Agree.

Respondents identified the top two perceived benefits to participating in an IP as “socially/ culturally learn more about a host country” ( $M = 4.61$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ) and “life-changing opportunity” ( $M = 4.60$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ) (see Table 2). Students also indicated

“experience the local nightlife (clubs, bars, etc.)” ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ) as the least perceived benefit to participating in an IP. These findings were also consistent with previous research by Edgar et al. (2018).

Table 2

*Perceived Benefits to Participating in an International Program (IP) (n = 666)*

Benefit statements	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Socially/Culturally learn more about a host country	4.61	0.67
Life-changing opportunity	4.60	0.66
Positive impact on my future career	4.44	0.76
Sets me apart when applying for grad school/ jobs	4.43	0.79
Enhance my employment prospects	4.34	0.83
IPs are very effective in building career skills	4.26	0.86
Opportunity to work/live abroad afterwards	4.21	0.97

Learn more about my academic field	4.18	0.93
Experience the local nightlife (clubs, bars, etc.)	3.87	1.18
<b>Grand Mean</b>	<b>4.33</b>	<b>0.59</b>

Note: Scale: 1=Completely Disagree, 2=Somewhat Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Somewhat Agree, and 5=Completely Agree.

Students who reported their classification ( $n = 672$ ) included: 31.5% freshman, 24.7% sophomores, 28.9% juniors, 13.5% seniors, 0.2% were graduate students, and 1.2% did not respond. Some participants reported they had previously participated in a University of Arkansas IP ( $n = 24$ , 3.6%), others had not ( $n = 597$ , 88.8%), and some gave no response ( $n = 51$ , 7.6%). There were 82.4% non-honors students ( $n = 554$ ), 13.5% honors students ( $n = 91$ ), and 4.0% ( $n = 27$ ) did not respond.

The majority of students were interested in a short-term faculty-led IP ( $n = 234$ , 27.2%), followed by international internships ( $n = 187$ , 21.8%), short-courses ( $n = 139$ , 16.2%), international exchanges ( $n = 138$ , 16.1%), University of Arkansas Rome Center campus program ( $n = 82$ , 9.5%), and international research ( $n = 79$ , 9.2%) (see Figure 1).

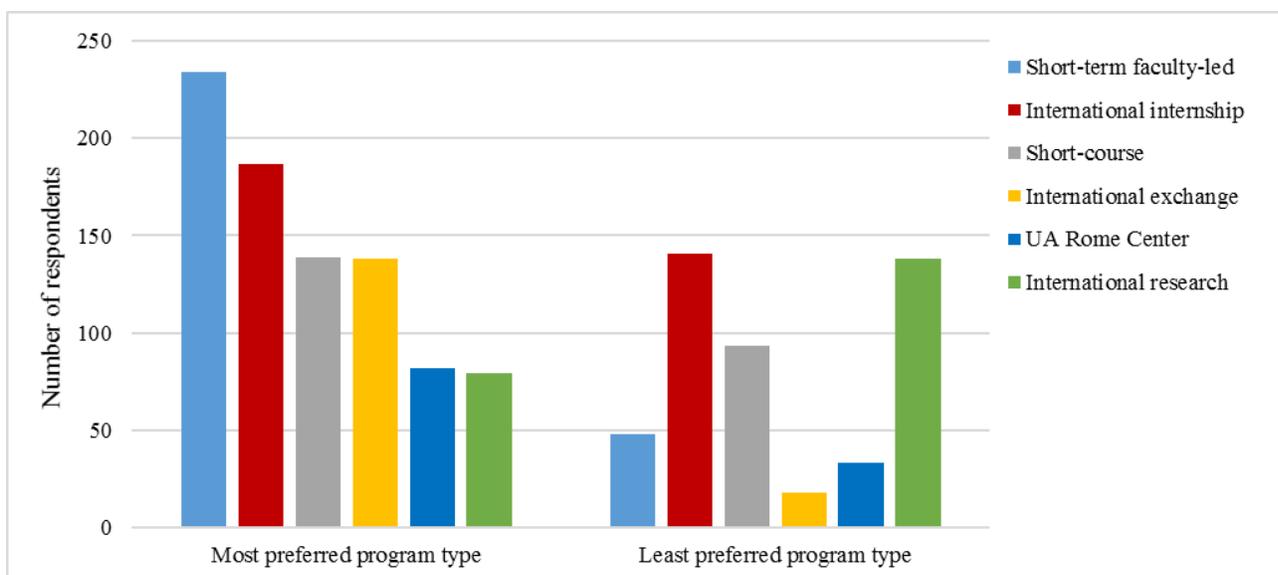


Figure 1. Most and least preferred program types for international program (IP) participation ( $n = 672$ ). (Note: Students could choose multiple program types.)

The majority of students wanted to participate in an IP during summer session I (first 5-week summer session) ( $n = 307$ , 39.4%). The least preferred participation

time was the fall semester ( $n = 125$ , 25.2%), which was followed by spring break ( $n = 124$ , 24.9%) (see Figure 2).

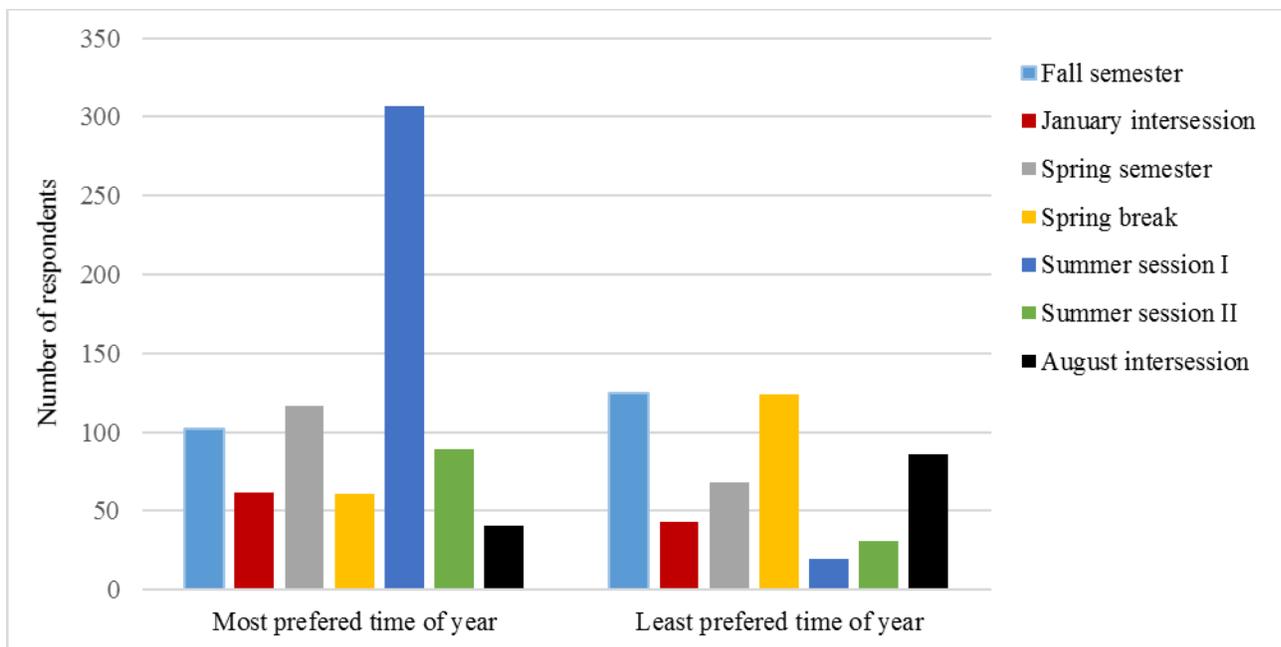


Figure 2. Most and least preferred time of year for international program (IP) participation ( $n = 672$ ). (Note: Students could choose multiple times of year for programs.)

In addition to the preferred time of year, the researchers also determined that most students preferred a program that was two to three weeks in length ( $n = 224$ , 30.7%). The second most commonly

preferred program length was four to six weeks ( $n = 214$ , 29.4%). The least preferred program length was two semesters or more ( $n = 308$ , 59.7%), followed by one week or less ( $n = 160$ , 31.0%) (see Figure 3).

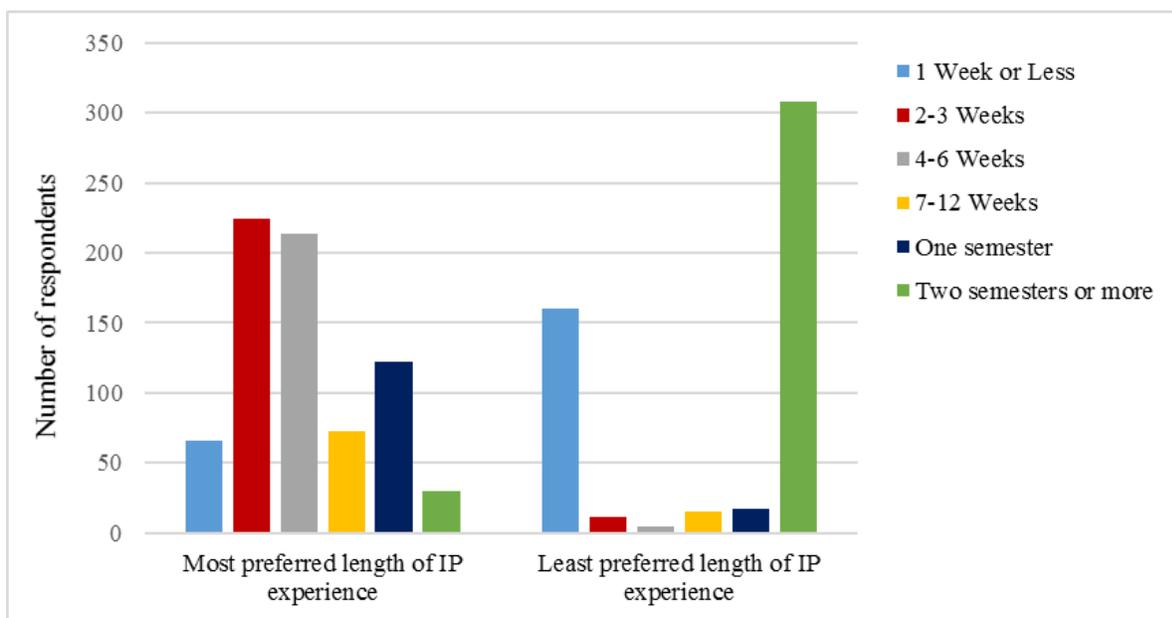


Figure 3. Most and least preferred length for international program (IP) ( $n = 672$ ). (Note: Students could choose multiple lengths of programs.)

Respondents also indicated they most preferred learning about future IP opportunities by email (n = 278, 34.8%)

followed by classroom visits (n = 111, 13.9%) and academic advisors (n = 108, 13.5%) (see Figure 4).

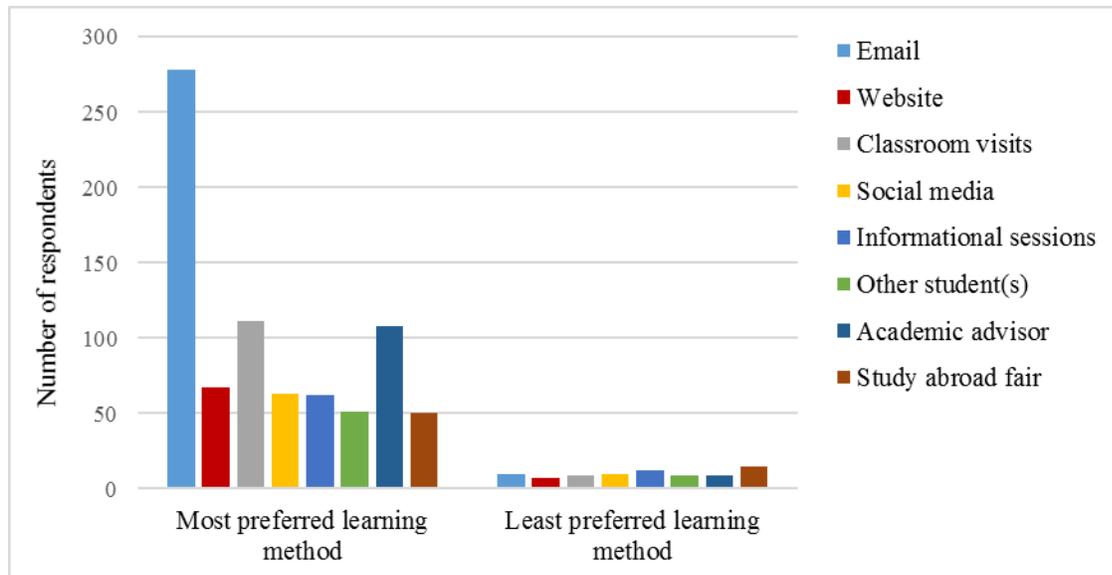


Figure 4. Most and least preferred method for learning about future international program (IP) experiences (n = 672).

Based on open responses, the top 10 countries students were interested in attending were determined from most to least: (1) Italy, (2) Australia, (3) Spain, (4) France, (5) Greece, (6) England, (7) New Zealand, (8) Ireland, (9) Japan, and (10) Germany. A map was generated to display the countries that University of Arkansas

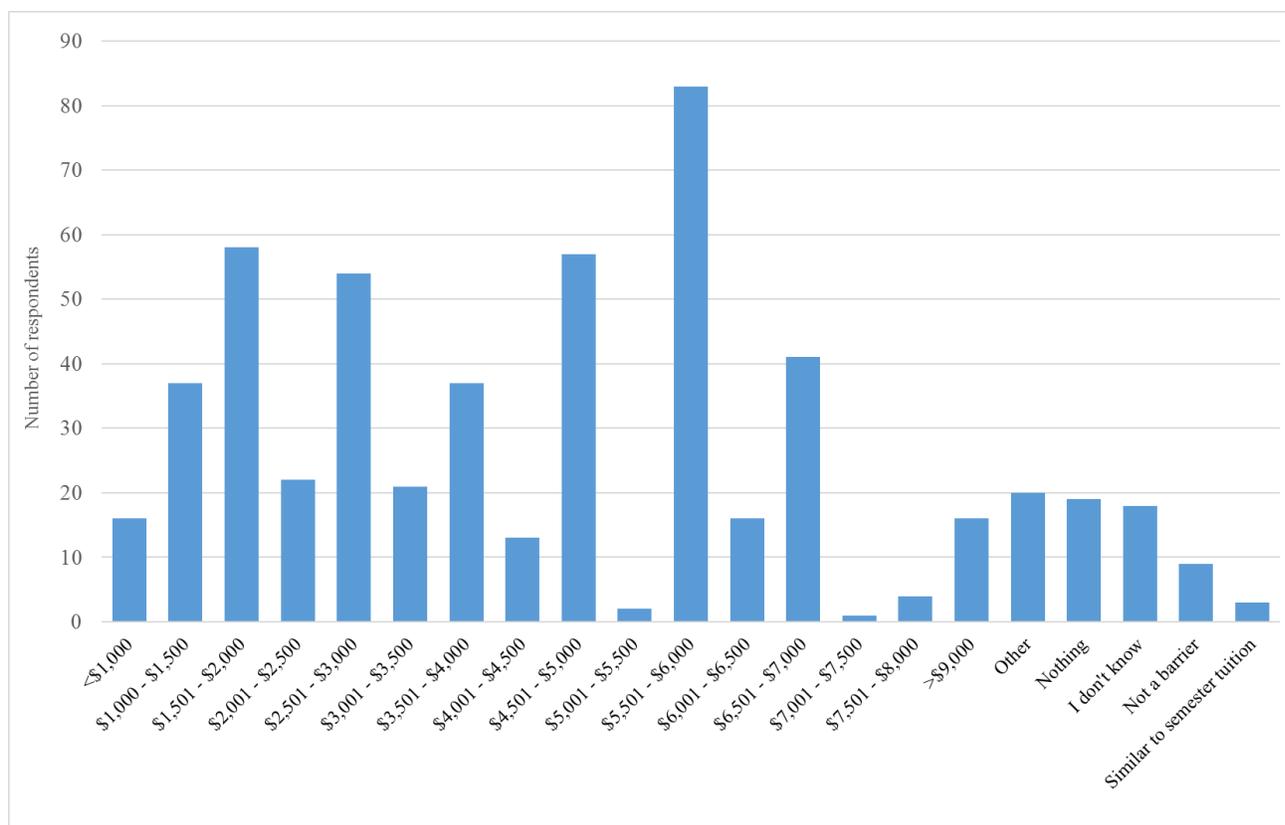
students preferred attending and IPs the Bumpers College offered during the 2018-2019 academic year (see Figure 5). Being an open response, preferred countries were recorded and cities, towns, etc. were changed to their respective country for coding purposes.



*Figure 5.* The blue shaded area represents the top 10 preferred international program (IP) locations and the pins represent active Bumpers College 2018-2019 academic year program locations.

Students were asked an open response question that stated, “If cost is the only barrier keeping you from participating in an IP, what is the most you would be willing to pay for an IP? (Hint: assuming the trip is the average 10 days to a three week long program and costs could range from \$5,800 to \$6,700.” The highest percentage of students indicated they would be willing

to pay between \$5,501 to \$6,000 ( $n = 83$ , 15.2%) followed by \$1,501 to \$2,000 ( $n = 58$ , 10.6%) and \$4,501 to \$5,000 ( $n = 57$ , 10.4%) (see Figure 6). This survey question was modified from the previous research by Edgar et al. (2018) which asked, “If cost is the only barrier keeping you from participating in an IP, what is the most you would be willing to pay for an IP?”



**Figure 6.** The most students were willing to pay for an international program (IP) ( $n = 555$ ). (Note: Students were told to assume the trip was between 10 days and three weeks long and would cost between \$5,800 and \$6,700.).

### Conclusions & Recommendations

It was determined that students' greatest perceived barriers to IP participation were cost and time. Furthermore, the greatest benefits to IP participation were ability to learn about a host country and ability to gain a life-changing opportunity. Respondents preferred IPs that were short-term, faculty-led programs during the summer for a length of two to six weeks. Therefore, these types of programs should be a high priority for Bumpers College. The top most preferred destinations for IPs was determined. These locations should be taken into consideration when developing and promoting programs within the Bumpers College to meet the demands of students. Outreach efforts should use emails, classroom visits, and academic advisors to inform students of

future IP opportunities. The Bumpers College IPO has conducted annual classroom visits. However, efforts should be increased to utilize email and academic advisors to encourage IP participation. The IPO should develop informational material academic advisors can use during meetings with students to indicate how Bumpers College IPs can be integrated within degree plans. Students indicated they were willing to pay \$5,501 to \$6,000 for an IP. However, Edgar et al. (2018) stated the highest percentage of students needed more information to make an informed decision followed by students being willing to pay \$1,000. These inconsistencies among willingness to pay indicated more research is needed to determine ideal costs of IPs. Furthermore, research should be conducted to determine if differences occur between

students' "willingness" to pay and "ability" to pay for an IP.

### Implications for Future Focus

Short-term programs are an ever-increasing part of international education (Hulstrand, 2006). This study and previous research by Edgar et al. (2018) and Estes et al. (2016) determined that students are most interested in short-term, faculty-led programs. However, a majority of people agree that longer-term programs provide the most in-depth learning experiences, but students were left out because they could not go for a variety of reasons (Hulstrand, 2006). However, there has been concern among educators in regard to "island programs" where students travel in an isolated group with their peers, and faculty from their home institution and have little interaction with the local population (Hulstrand, 2006). Lewis and Nisenbaum (2005) determined why students found short-term programs beneficial and tested specific strategies to enhance short-term programs that result in outcomes that are closer to longer term programs. Short-term programs should link previous campus coursework to experiences abroad and engage students in specific community-based research and or service-learning projects (Lewis & Nisenbaum, 2005). Future research should determine specific program characteristics of Bumpers College service-learning and research focused IPs that imitate goals of semester long or yearlong programs. Then, additional research should be conducted to determine how these program best practices can be incorporated into short-term, faculty-led programs with a length of two to six weeks.

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