

doi: 10.5191/jiaee.2018.25108

College of Agricultural, Food, and Life Sciences International Education: Students' Preferred Location of Travel and Perceptions of Benefits and Barriers

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Abstract

The University of Arkansas has a campus-wide goal of 25 percent of students participating in an international program prior to graduation. This created concern because only three percent of Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences (Bumpers College) students participated in an international program prior to 2012. For five years, the Bumpers College International Programs Office (IPO) has assessed students to determine their perceived benefits, barriers, and needs in an effort to design international programs of interest and increase student participation. In this study, Bumpers College students were surveyed to determine perceived benefits and barriers to participating in an international program and identify the countries of interest in visiting. Instruments were administered via paper form to 1,165 students enrolled in large section courses in fall 2016. Using a six-point Likert-type scale, students' believed international program participation "looks good on a resume" with a mean of 5.46 (SD = 0.77). The least important statement was "increased employability" with a mean of 4.92 (SD = 1.00). Students slightly agreed or agreed to all questionnaire benefit statements. The barrier statement "costs too high" was identified as the most important with a mean of 4.79 (SD = 1.12). The least important statement was "an international program will not have an impact on my future career" with a mean of 2.12 (SD = 1.21). About 72% of students were willing to participate in an international experience in a European country. Recommendations for practice and research are discussed and identified limitations are provided.

Keywords: international experiences, international program benefits and barriers, countries of interest, study abroad, study abroad preferences

Introduction

Over the past decade, higher education in the United States has noted international education program participation increase. Study abroad programs offer opportunities for students to immerse in cultures, foreign languages, and varying lifestyles (Clarke, Flaherty, Wright, & McMillen, 2009). Study abroad program benefits include increases in intercultural awareness, social proficiency, interdisciplinary study, perceptions of globalization, and intercultural communication (Clarke et al., 2009; Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005).

Study abroad experiences for students in United States have been a common theme in higher education since the 1970s (Hachtmann, 2012). These experiences have diversified over the years, starting as a general education model focused primarily on sending mostly female students to Western European countries for cultural and language training (Hachtmann, 2012). Most study abroad experiences focus on preparing students for a global market, and the typical experience is not easily defined (Hachtmann, 2012). Research notes that international programs serve as an enhanced educational experience (Hachtmann, 2012) and prepare students for a globalized workforce (Andreasen, 2003). Recently, student participation in study abroad experiences in the Bumpers College has increased.

Engaging in international experiences provides students with many educational opportunities and instances to develop professionally and personally (Estes, Hansen, & Edgar, 2016; Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001; Roberts & Edwards, 2016). The Institute for the International Education of Students (IES) surveyed 3,400 alumni who studied abroad from 1950 through 1999. The results showed participating in an

international program was a defining event that continues to impact the individual's life long after the program is over, no matter where the individuals studied or the length of their program (Norris & Gillespie, 2009). Students' interest and motivation to participate in an international experience are mostly due to the effects it could have on their future, including: a) increasing awareness of diversity, b) developing a global perspective, c) improving job marketability, and d) creating lifelong friendships (Estes et al., 2016; Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001). In addition, when selecting an international program, students engage in assessing the pros and cons of participating before committing (Estes et al., 2016). By understanding students' perceived needs, barriers, and benefits efforts can be focused on increasing student participation in international experiences (Danjean, Bunch, & Blackburn, 2016). Research also links the accumulation of culturally relevant knowledge gained from study abroad experiences to creative thinking processes (Lee, Therriault, & Linderholm, 2012). However, little research exists for where students want to study abroad and their motivations to participate in an international education experience (Anderson, Hubbard, & Lawton, 2015).

Within the framework of a global knowledge-economy, universities provide and advertise study abroad experiences that are thought to equip students with the skills, abilities, and mindsets "needed to deal with the realities of globalizing markets, greater job insecurity, and the likelihood of continual occupational mobility throughout their lives" (Barnick, 2010, p. 21). In 2010, the University of Arkansas set a goal for twenty-five percent of graduating seniors to complete an international experience by 2020 (University of Arkansas Annual Report, 2013). However, the current rate of

graduating seniors in the Bumpers College completing an international experience ranges from three to five percent annually. Bumpers College students have shown positive perceptions to international program participation and participation rates have recently began to increase (Estes et al., 2016). Additionally, by understanding where students want to study abroad, more targeted efforts can be placed on building programs in student areas of interest.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this research was based on College Choice Theory. College choice theory maintains three decision-making stages that can be used in the context of selecting study abroad programs; namely, 1) study abroad intent, 2) program search, and 3) location selection (Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2009). To tie the theory of college choice theory (conceptually) to the described processes that occur during a study abroad experience (Conner, 2013), social cognitive theory was utilized to ground the theoretical framework. The learning stages of symbolizing and forethought in the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) are particularly important in students' decision to participate in and prepare for engaging in an international learning experience, like their ability to symbolize. Symbolizing capability allows individuals to adapt and alter their surrounding environment and assign meaning to that experience; it is also the first capability learners must negotiate (Bandura, 1986; Conner, 2013). Students who decide and prepare to engage in international experience must first navigate this capability if they desire to attribute meaning to the change in their environment, which in this case is an international learning experience. Forethought capability allows learners to think about the consequences that their actions will create

before they engage in the behaviors (Bandura, 1986). Understanding action consequences is important for students who are making the decision to study abroad, because they must weigh the consequences or barriers of an international experience before choosing to engage in the experience.

The expectancy-value theory has been used for decades in an effort to understand motivation (Eccles, 2013). This comprehensive model synthesizes multiple theoretical perspectives and captures key components of motivation in an effort to explain a wide range of achievement-related behaviors (Barron & Hulleman, 2014). The model focuses on understanding the subjective-task value, and was built on work associated with decision-making, achievement theory, and attribution theory (Crandall, 1969; Weiner, 1979). The expectancy-value theory model was used to identify an individual's likely decision based on two beliefs: 1) an individual's expectation for success and 2) the importance or value the individual placed on the activity/task. Eccles (2013) noted: "We believe that the conscious and non-conscious choices people make about how to spend time and effort lead, over time, to marked differences between groups and individuals in lifelong achievement-related patterns" (p. 106). Researchers have noted that the critical issue is the relative personal value an individual places on the choice options they face (Barron & Hulleman, 2014; Crandall, 1969; Eccles, 2013; Weiner, 1979). For this research, those choice options were focused on study abroad experiences.

Study abroad programs cultivate global awareness and competency (Norris & Gillespie, 2009; Salisbury et al., 2009). To review, students perceive study abroad benefits that may include various culture exposure, participation noted on curriculum vitae or résumé, and the identified

opportunity to study academic areas not available locally or within their degree programs (Anderson et al., 2015; Danjean et al., 2016; Doyle, Gendall, & Meyer, 2010; Estes et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2012). The most common perceived barrier is focused on financial concerns (Anderson et al., 2015; Danjean et al., 2016; Doyle et al., 2010; Estes et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2012). Again, little research exists to determine where students are interested in studying abroad. This research was an attempt to assess students enrolled in a college of agriculture to understand their perceived barriers, benefits, and location interests if choosing to study abroad.

Purpose and Objectives

This study assessed students enrolled at the University of Arkansas in the Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences to understand their perceived benefits of and barriers to participating in an international educational experience. The study also sought to identify participants study abroad location interests. Three objectives guided this study:

1. Describe students' perceived benefits of participating in an international program.
2. Describe students' perceived barriers of participating in an international program.
3. Identify students' preferences for location when choosing an international program.

Method

This study used descriptive survey methodology. The survey population consisted of a random stratified sample of courses by academic department (Trochim, 2001) of large-enrollment (more than 50 students) fall 2016 undergraduate courses in the Bumpers College (N courses identified = 26). Of the courses selected to participate,

fifteen course instructors agreed to have their students participate in this study. Students were provided paper instruments, and they were distributed during a regularly scheduled class meeting for each course. Prior to instrument distribution, a brief statement was read explaining the purpose and voluntary nature of the study and asking students to complete the instrument only once. According to official course rosters, 1,694 (potentially duplicated) undergraduate students were enrolled in these 15 courses; usable data were collected from 1,165 students for a 68.8% response rate.

The instrument consisted of 34 questions that assessed students' perceived benefits and barriers to participating in an international experience, and gathered information regarding their location preferences for an international learning experience. Part I of the instrument assessed students' perceived benefits to participation in an international experience; participants answered these questions on a six-point Likert response scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (6). In this section, the instrument also assessed students' perceived barriers to engage in international experiences; participants also answered these questions on the same six-point response scale, *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (6). The benefits and barrier options used in this research were based on research studies by Edgar and Edgar (2009), Estes et al. (2016), and Wingenbach et al. (2003). Part II of the instrument focused on preferred areas of international study. Respondents had the opportunity to make additional comments in open-ended responses. Part III of the instrument focused on students' demographics and willingness to participate in an international experience as well as provided them space for written comments. Instrument face and content validity was assessed and deemed acceptable by faculty representatives who

serve on the Bumpers College International Programs Committee. This committee consists of one faculty member from each of the 10 academic units in the college. Each of these individuals had international experience.

Data was entered into Excel™ for compilation and analyzed with SPSS© version 23. Data analyses consisted of descriptive statistics, including the computing of frequencies, means, standard deviations, and percentages. Categorization of the open-ended responses occurred first and then they were counted to determine frequency.

Results

Of the students who reported their classification ($n = 1,142$), 39.9% were sophomores, 27.7% were juniors, 19.3% were seniors, and 13.1% were freshman. Students ($n = 1,059$) reported if they were interested in participating in an international program, with 71.8% reporting they were interested, 19.2% were not interested, 8.1%

had previously participated in an international program, and less than 1% were unsure of their interest. Of all participants, 78.9% ($n = 836$) were willing to participate in an international program.

Students' responses to the international program benefits, outlined in this research, noted they "slightly agreed" to "agreed" with all statements. The most supported statements were that international programs help build my résumé ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 0.77$), have a life changing impact on my life ($M = 5.45$, $SD = 0.81$), and participation impact will last a lifetime ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 0.84$). Participants were less likely to agree with statements such as an international experience will increase their level of employability ($M = 4.92$, $SD = 1.00$) and an international experience would assist them in learning more about their academic field ($M = 4.96$, $SD = 1.02$). Table 1 contains a complete list of students' perceived benefits.

Table 1

Students' Perceived International Program Participation Benefits (n = 1,163)

Benefit	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Study abroad participation looks good on a résumé	1,163	5.46	0.77
Life-changing opportunity	1,163	5.45	0.81
Impact will last a lifetime	1,161	5.41	0.84
I can make new friends outside of my comfort zone	1,160	5.31	0.85
Important aspect of personal growth	1,161	5.29	0.89
Participation sets me apart when applying for graduate school or jobs	1,162	5.25	0.91
Change my perspective on life	1,163	5.21	0.96
Positive impact on my future career	1,163	5.20	0.88
Become a more well-rounded citizen	1,163	5.12	0.94
International program participation is a very effective way to build job skills	1,161	5.12	0.91

Opportunity to work/live abroad after the international program	1,162	5.03	1.02
Enables me to tolerate ambiguity	1,160	5.03	0.95
Learn more about my academic field	1,162	4.96	1.02
Increased employability	1,163	4.92	1.00

Note. Scale used was 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Slightly Disagree, 4 = Slightly Agree, 5 = Agree, 6 = Strongly Agree.

There was more variability in participants' responses to perceived international program barriers with responses varying between "disagree" and "slightly agree". Costs ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 1.12$), work ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.17$), and school commitments ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.49$) were the most readily identified barriers of international program participation. Students disagreed with the statements: "an international program will not have an impact on my future career" ($M = 2.12$, $SD = 1.21$), "an international program will not help me become more employable" ($M = 2.15$, $SD = 1.17$), and "an international program will not help me academically" ($M = 2.25$, $SD = 1.27$). Table 2 contains a complete list of students' perceived barriers.

Due to the nature of the instrument, students could identify multiple continents or countries of interest. There were 969 participants who noted areas of preferred travel for international experiences. Students interested in participating in international program opportunities preferred to travel to European countries ($n = 1,991$), followed by Oceania ($n = 353$), Asia ($n = 199$), South America ($n = 169$), Africa ($n = 159$), North America ($n = 107$), and the Caribbean ($n = 22$).

Of the Europe region interests, Italy ($n = 417$) was most preferred, followed by Spain ($n = 288$), France ($n = 223$), the

United Kingdom ($n = 209$), Greece ($n = 159$), Ireland ($n = 148$), Europe ($n = 138$), Germany ($n = 132$), Scotland ($n = 71$), Sweden ($n = 43$), Switzerland ($n = 31$), Netherlands ($n = 20$), and Austria ($n = 19$). There were 26 countries identified as locations of interest in Europe.

Of the Oceania region, Australia ($n = 246$) was most preferred, followed by New Zealand ($n = 102$). Bora Bora, Brunei, Fiji, and Nauru were all listed once as possible locations of interest in the Oceania region.

The third most identified area of interest was Asia. In this region, Japan ($n = 48$) was most preferred, followed by China ($n = 39$), and India ($n = 30$), Thailand ($n = 25$), Asia ($n = 10$), Vietnam ($n = 7$), Korea ($n = 5$), Russia ($n = 5$), South Korea ($n = 5$), and United Arab Emirates ($n = 4$). There were 25 countries in the Asia region identified as areas of international program travel interest by Bumpers College students.

Of the South America region, Brazil ($n = 62$) was most preferred, followed by Argentina ($n = 30$), Costa Rica ($n = 22$), South America ($n = 21$), Chile ($n = 11$), Peru ($n = 10$), Columbia ($n = 5$), Bolivia ($n = 4$), and Ecuador ($n = 3$). There were 12 countries in the South America identified as areas of interest.

Table 2

Students' Perceived International Program Participation Barriers (n = 1,159)

Barrier	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
International program costs are too high	1,159	4.79	1.12
I'm too busy with school	1,158	4.35	1.17
I'm too busy with work	1,154	3.91	1.49
I am unable to participate, because there are not enough funding opportunities for me	1,147	3.80	1.40
International program courses offered do not fit into my degree plan	1,148	3.20	1.48
I am not aware of international program opportunities	1,151	3.08	1.40
I am unable to participate, because I have a lack of support from my parents	1,152	2.66	1.48
My academic department does not encourage international program participation	1,146	2.55	1.31
An international program will not help me academically	1,153	2.25	1.27
I do not want to participate in an international program	1,152	2.18	1.37
An international program will not help me become more employable	1,156	2.15	1.17
An international program will not have an impact on my future career	1,154	2.12	1.21

Note. Scale used was 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Slightly Disagree, 4 = Slightly Agree, 5 = Agree, 6 = Strongly Agree.

The fifth most identified area of interest was Africa. In this region, Africa ($n = 61$) was most preferred, followed by South Africa ($n = 58$), and Kenya ($n = 7$), Mozambique ($n = 7$), Egypt ($n = 6$), Ghana ($n = 4$), Morocco ($n = 4$), Nigeria ($n = 4$), and Uganda ($n = 3$). There were 14 countries in Africa identified as areas of interest by Bumpers College students.

Of the North American region, Mexico ($n = 25$) was most preferred, followed by Belize ($n = 22$), Canada ($n = 14$), the United States ($n = 12$), Panama ($n = 11$), Central America ($n = 5$), Guatemala ($n = 5$), and Honduras ($n = 5$). There were 13 countries in the North America listed.

The final region was the Caribbean. Of the Caribbean region, The Bahamas ($n = 4$) and Caribbean ($n = 4$) were most preferred, followed by Cuba ($n = 3$), Jamaica ($n = 3$), Haiti ($n = 2$), and Puerto Rico ($n = 2$). There were 10 countries in the Caribbean region identified as locations of interest.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

More than one-half of the participants (71.8%) in this study were interested in participating in an international program. Students' responses to the potential international program participation

benefits outlined in this research noted they “agreed” with all statements. The most identified benefits were international programs help build their résumés ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 0.77$) and can have a life-changing impact ($M = 5.45$, $SD = 0.81$). This research supports previous findings by Danjean et al. (2016), Doyle et al. (2010), and Estes et al. (2016), and mirrors benefits noted in previous research including increased awareness of diversity, developing a global perspective, improving job marketability, and creating lifelong friendships (Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001).

However, there was more variability in responses for barriers. Costs ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 1.12$), work ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.17$), and school commitments ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.49$) were the most identified barriers to the lack of international program participation. This mirrors previous research that identified costs and career as limiting factors when choosing to study abroad (Danjean et al., 2016; Estes et al., 2016; Salisbury et al., 2009).

This research is not without limitations. The students in our study were from one mid-south region land-grant university. As a result, the findings cannot be generalizable beyond those who participated in this research or this university. Additional research on student benefits, barriers, and interest areas for studying abroad is important. One potential research question related to location is whether students perceived costs vary by geographical region. In addition, these results are limited to construct validity of the scale.

In spite of the limitations, this research supports previous research by Estes and colleagues (2016) and identified benefits and barriers to studying abroad. By understanding students’ perceived barriers and benefits to studying abroad colleges of agriculture will be able to support

international program efforts focused on increasing student participation (Danjean et al., 2016). Researchers have noted the need for colleges of agriculture to put more emphasis on international experiences and the learning afforded through them (Estes et al., 2016; Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001). A key concept of learning when viewed through a social cognitive theory lens is students must be able to alter their environment and assign meaning to an experience (Bandura, 1986); however, students cannot begin to do that unless opportunities are afforded to them. Therefore, this study was an important step forward in understanding students’ international experience interests, needs, and locations of study. This research was the first step in understanding student needs and location preference in one college of agriculture.

In an effort to expand student forethought, key to learning (Bandura, 1986), Bumpers College must understand students’ needs (outlined as benefits and barriers) to tailor communication messages about the opportunities associated with international experiences and build programs in countries where students have interest. With shrinking institutional budgets and the desire to serve students in all educational areas, it is important to focus international programming areas on student needs and interests (Estes et al., 2016). Better understanding students’ perceived needs can benefit institutions of higher learning in the following areas: a) allow targeted, promotional efforts to outline benefits and reduce barriers when possible, b) create a more concise strategy to develop international programs in regions and countries of student interests, and c) create increased understanding of student needs that can assist with targeting additional funding.

At the University of Arkansas, the call for increased numbers of students

engaged in international educational experiences may change; however, continued efforts to create high-caliber international programs that meet student needs will not. This research may provide insight for other colleges of agriculture interested in creating more targeted program that can reduce time and funding allocations on these initiatives. Findings from this study will be used to guide the Bumpers College International Programs Office international program development over the next few years. With budget cuts, increased global unrest, and pressure from administration to create and fill international programs, there is a need to focus international programming areas on student needs and interests and, where possible, reduce barriers. Program assessments continue to be critical to understand an ever-changing student base and to create successful international programs.

It is obvious that students enrolled in the Bumpers College were most interested in programs in Europe. There are numerous reasons regarding why this might be the case, including: a) years of experience creating programs on this continent, b) students' perceived ease of communicating (as most countries in this area speak fluent English), and c) ease of travel (Estes et al., 2016). It is also likely that this selection occurred due to this continent being the primary focus for previous Bumpers College international programs (Estes et al., 2016). If colleges of agriculture are able to address students' monetary and work concerns, while increasing the visibility and accessibility of international program experiences in areas of their preference, increased participation rates may occur. This research also brought to light that educating college students about the diversity and variety of travel, international program funding opportunities available, and benefits of participation in study abroad could

encourage students to apply for a program of interest. Additional assessment regarding students' perceived benefits, barriers, and needs regarding international programs participation is recommended to sustain and increase international program growth, especially in colleges of agriculture.

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