

## **Is Binational Study Abroad Good Enough in a Multinational World?**

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It is only when one attends an event like a NAFSA conference, with its 7400 participants from over ninety countries, its booths and sales paraphernalia, and its earnest meetings on this or that aspect of the management of international exchanges, that one realizes how huge an expenditure of effort goes into the promotion and operation of international student exchange. The effort is directed at a very wide audience of students in a very diverse collection of institutions, and its goal is variously financial gain and educational improvement. U.S. students studying abroad participate in a range of programs, from island programs in which they work largely with other American students to programs in which they study with in-country institutions, sometimes by direct enrollment in foreign universities. Many students are embarked on their first visit, or first extended visit, abroad. Others, given the massive increase in travel abroad in recent years, have already spent time abroad and are relatively sophisticated travelers, or they come from families that are themselves products of crossing national and cultural lines. These latter students have an understanding of difference that their less well-traveled contemporaries do not have.

One of the goals of study abroad is, or should be, the broadening of a student's perspective. A protracted stay in a second country, we are told, helps students understand cultural differences through a lived comparative experience. By immersing themselves in a new culture and often a different language, and also by learning about that culture, they not only create for themselves a second way of being in the world but also construct a mirror through which they can examine their own culture. Such a bicultural perspective is immensely valuable, as we know from literally generations of experience. But it does not automatically follow that such biculturalism will lead to awareness of cultural

diversity in general. We are all familiar with the student who, having spent time in Japan, returns enamored of all things Japanese, or, having spent time in France, comes back with a highly developed palate and an exquisite taste for cheese. I recall that, many years ago, back in the Dark Ages, when I first became involved in study abroad, I attempted to convince the modern languages department of my institution that it would be good to set up a program in France. “Why on earth would someone want to spend time in France?” asked the non-French faculty. “Spain we understand, but *France?*” (No one even talked about Mexico....) I need hardly add that the French reacted in a rather similar way with respect to Spain. At the time I develop the term “bicultural chauvinism” to describe such attitudes. They may have lessened today, but they are still there.

One of the main reasons for learning Spanish is so that one can then learn French. One of the main reasons for learning French is so that one can then learn Spanish – or Gujarati, or Farsi, or Vietnamese, or Irish. Learning a language is, our ought to be, a way of moving on to language learning in general. We might say the same about study abroad. Yes, we need, ideally, a significant immersion experience in a second culture, but the purpose of that experience is not only to learn about the culture in question, but to master the art of culture learning, to discover those resources in oneself that allow one to adapt to many cultures, that lower one’s fear of those who are different from oneself.

Well-designed programs of study abroad will develop those resources in their students. Most such programs are of course based in a single country. But a few are not. We will discover something about such programs today. It is certainly arguable that in the globalized society of today such multinational experience is essential, whether it comes through study abroad or in some other way. But it is worth pointing out that globalization itself raises other kinds of issues that must also be confronted.

Globalization can be defined in many ways, as we all know. For some it is economic convergence, for some it is connectivity, for some it is the emergence of a multicultural society, for some it is the emergence of an internationalized elite. All of these phenomena, one way or the other, lessen the educational effectiveness of binational

experience or present particular challenges. Connectivity, particularly, means that students can be in constant contact with their family and friends even when they are on the other side of the world. When challenged by cultural difference, they can organize entire family conferences on how to deal with it. They are seldom thrown back on their own resources as they once were, when communication was more difficult. The emergence of an international elite means that, as a result of economic convergence and the appearance of unregulated markets (I use that term deliberately: the term “free market” is a loaded positive), much of the world is wearing the same clothes, eating the same food, visiting the same coffee shops, watching the same television, and circulating in largely identical malls. This elite, characterized by shallow convergence that may none the less mask deep cultural differences, is often also cut off from local populations, such that the cultural differences between members of the elite and average citizens are as great as those between members of the elite in one country and members of the elite in another. Indeed, even thinking in terms of a “multinational” world (as in the title of this session) suggests only a set of barriers *between* nations and does not address perhaps equally impenetrable barriers *within* nations: transcultural contact is not two-dimensional but three-dimensional or multi-dimensional. As this process of convergence advances, study programs abroad are challenged to go beyond superficial cultural and social differences to reach excluded populations, including those who are economically and culturally excluded from mainstream culture. Is convergence inevitably and indisputably a good thing, or should we strive for a means of managing diversity that is both humane and fully supportive of the development of the individual? Perhaps the alternative to cultural difference is cultural alienation, or even cultural exploitation. For this and other reasons, study-abroad programs are also confronted by ethical imperatives. It is not enough to use foreign populations as objects of study: it is also important to give something back, to make the benefit of such contact two-directional at least.

Study-abroad experiences that span more than one country are, then, one answer to the increased interconnectedness of nations and cultures. They can build on prior cultural knowledge, diversify points of comparison, and also reveal issues and problems common to many cultures. But if they are to do these things, they must be carefully designed to

avoid mere superficiality, to avoid mere passing acquaintance with a diversity of cultures. Our assumption that the processes of globalization are natural – that they are taking place inevitably, without the intervention of human decision – is erroneous: these processes are willed, they derive from particular political ideologies, and they are designed for particular ends. Comparative approaches to cultures can teach young people a great deal about how to channel globalization in productive ways and how to avoid its abuses. And that is the subject of this panel.