

# ENHANCING EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE OF BUSINESS STUDENTS THROUGH ENGAGEMENT IN INNOVATIVE AND IMPACTFUL SHORT-TERM STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM – A CASE STUDY AND BEYOND

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## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this article is to review and summarize existing literature on short-term study abroad programs (SSAPs) into a coherent whole in a way that faculty and administration can use the information to design and implement an effective SSAP for their business students. In light of increasing popularity of SSAPs, the need for such information is self-evident to build programs that add value to business students' growth and education. In addition to existing literature, the article also draws its recommendations on an existing program at a business school of a small liberal arts university. The demographics and feedback from the participants in the SSAP are provided.*

## INTRODUCTION

Short-term study abroad programs (SSAPs) are an increasingly popular way to engage students through experience - learn by going (Keese & O'Brien, 2011). Programs in which students are engaged for fewer than eight weeks are characterized as short-term and their increasing popularity is noted in literature (Donnelly-Smith, 2009; Mapp, 2012; Schulmann, 2016). As per Schulmann, the participation in SSAPs doubled over the decade from 2004 to 2014. The trend is not abating. However, not all SSAPs are created equal. They can vary widely in length, cost and design elements. There is no standardized structure for these SSAPs. It is not surprising that the results on the benefits of such programs are mixed (Stone & Petrick, 2013). There is some literature making suggestions on the design elements of SSAPs. It is, however, difficult to find a current article linking theory and practice.

The purpose of this article is to review and summarize existing literature on SSAPs into a coherent whole in a way that faculty and administration can use the information to design and implement an effective SSAP for their business students. In light of increasing popularity of SSAPs (Mapp, 2012), the need for such information is self-evident to build programs that add value to business students' growth and education. In addition to the existing literature, the article also draws its recommendations on an existing program at a business school of a small liberal arts university. The demographics and feedback from the participants in this SSAP are provided.

## BUSINESS EDUCATION, CULTURAL COMPETENCE AND STUDY ABROAD

The call for university students to be global minded and possess cross cultural competence to be effective leaders in the future is hard to miss (Sision & Brennan, 2012). Universities seeking to prepare world citizens or globally aware employees must incorporate global learning objectives as a part of their curriculum (Brenenstuhel & Gresham, 2002). As business markets continue to grow and operate on a global scale, an increased emphasis on business students engaging with these markets in an abroad experience is increasing (Carley & Stuart, Dailey, 2011). Accreditation agencies like AACSB (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) and ACBSP (Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs) require business schools to imbed global elements into business curricula (Ramakrishna, Sarkar & Vijayaraman, 2016).

Business students can be educated in global and cross-cultural issues in multiple ways ranging from classroom lectures, experiential exercises, faculty led trips to independent study abroad. It is often argued that for enhancing cross-cultural competence, an important element of global mindedness, first-hand experience with foreign cultures is more impressionable than lectures or other class activities (Wooldridge, Peet & Meyer, 2018). This is especially true for those undergraduate students who have not traveled beyond their states or the USA/North America (Brenenstuhel, Gresham, 2002). For students seeking a degree or certifications in

international business emphasis is placed on the “direct and internalized understandings of foreign nations and cultures” (Aggarwal & Goodell, 2015).

The role of study abroad programs in business education is well established (Carley, Stuart & Dailey, 2011). Despite the availability of study abroad programs at most business schools, only a small percentage of undergraduate business students actually study abroad (Wooldridge, Peet, Meyer, 2018). According to Schulmann (2016), the percentage of students studying in a year or semester-long study-abroad program is decreasing and is less than three and six percent respectively. The challenge students note for such low participation include cost, fears of delayed graduation, anxiety about the unknown, unwillingness to be away from friends or family, concerns about lost part-time/summer/full-time work wages, misconceptions about non-native cultures or doubts about success in a non-native culture. The increasing popularity of SSAPs might be attributed to overcoming above-mentioned concerns of students. Popularity and effectiveness are not identical, and one has to wonder if design elements of impactful SSAPs can be identified.

Based on our literature review of SSAPs, key decision points for designing a program have been identified and explained in this paper. A thoughtful consideration of these points is critical to design an impactful SSAP. Decision making around those key points is explained using the examples of the program that we are showcasing in this paper – Taiwan Program. The program has been in existence for eight years. Fifty-eight students have participated in the program and student feedback has been very positive. We consider the program innovative and impactful because it incorporates multiple elements in which students can learn about a foreign culture. Exposure to foreign culture can be gained through prolonged interactions with members of foreign cultures, leisure travel to foreign cultures, study abroad, faculty led trips, class lectures or some combination. Taiwan Program is a combination of all these elements. A brief summary of the program follows prior to identification and explanation of the key decision points.

## A CASE STUDY - TAIWAN PROGRAM SUMMARY

Taiwan program is a six-week long summer program. It is designed and implemented with the help of a partner university

### FIGURE 1 JOB RESPONSIBILITIES

<p><b>Faculty Director</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Completed Study Abroad Office Program Proposal Form, went through process which allowed program to be an official offering</li> <li>- Went through the curricular process</li> <li>- Promoted program and answered questions among COBE faculty</li> <li>- Made presentations in COBE classes to recruit students</li> <li>- Oversaw all recruitment efforts</li> <li>- Managed logistics of grant allocations</li> <li>- Advised each participant on course transfer options</li> <li>- Communicated with the Registrar's Office on what students would receive from the summer transfer credits</li> <li>- Coordinated all administrative details for a spring semester, 3 credit course - wrote syllabus, found adjunct to teach the course, evaluated the course</li> <li>- Oversaw and purchased group flights</li> <li>- Managed program budget and paid all bills, including to abroad institution</li> <li>- Along with the Study Abroad Director, managed student health and behavior situations with local partners</li> <li>- Worked with social media intern to promote the program through student blog posts</li> <li>- Negotiated price of program</li> <li>- Oversaw what company visits would be offered, allowing students to receive internship credit in the fall (included grading student portfolios)</li> <li>- Found faculty or staff member to travel with the group to get them settled</li> <li>- Managed donor relations for endowment for the program</li> </ul>
<p><b>Study Abroad Office</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Collected \$500 deposits</li> <li>- Gave Faculty Director the applications for the grants</li> <li>- Notified students of award amounts</li> <li>- Billed the students</li> <li>- Enrolled students in international health insurance</li> <li>- Created program brochure</li> <li>- Helped promote information meetings</li> <li>- Performed judicial and health checks on students</li> <li>- Made sure all waivers were completed</li> <li>- Helped Faculty Director in finding group flights</li> <li>- Went to prep class to help students with abroad institution's application and AU paperwork</li> </ul>

in Taiwan. Our university has a faculty, student and credits exchange agreement with this university. Students participating in the Taiwan program are housed in the general student housing at the host institution. There is a single residence hall opened for summer session students. In addition to the students sent by the home institution, there are many international students housed in this space. European students have been the primary demographic that our students have lived and interacted with at the host institution. Business students from Spain and Germany have connected with the Taiwan summer program through third party providers and other connected institutions. Taiwanese students also reside in this dorm building on campus. The university recreation facilities, library, common spaces, and cafeteria are available to students participating in the program. Furthermore, the host institution is located in a metropolitan area and is a listed stop on the local public transportation line. Students can quickly and easily access a myriad of food and entertainment options very close to the host institution.

The host institution provides a dedicated person to manage the logistics of the program. Our students are paired with host students who act as learning partners for each other. Weekend and longer excursions are imbedded into the program. Host university professors align their classroom assignments with the excursion trips. Students attend classes Monday through Thursday and often travel outside the city on weekends.

Taiwan Program is also a close collaboration between the Study Abroad Office and the College of Business and Economics (COBE). See Figure 1 for the job responsibilities of both the COBE and Study Abroad Office. Students travel to Taiwan with a business faculty member or a study-abroad staff member on alternate years. (see Figure 1 on page 128)

Students take a preparatory class taught jointly by a Taiwanese fluent in Mandarin and business faculty director of the program. The program is partially funded through endowment provided by a Business Advisory Council member.

The program is well supported by college administration including the deans and chairs. Students from all majors and all class-levels are able to participate because of the flexibility in which academic credits are allocated using “special topics courses.” The data related to participants for the eight-year period is provided in Figure 2.

**FIGURE 2  
PROGRAM STATISTICS (2011-2018)**

Total Program Participants:	58	Average ACT	24
Survey Participants:	33	Average GPA	3.38
Response Rate:	57%		
<b>Class Breakdown:</b>			
Freshman	3%	<b>Gender Breakdown</b>	
Sophomore	18%	Male	45%
Junior	48%	Female	55%
Senior	30%		
First Time Traveling Abroad	36%		
First Time Studying Abroad	94%		

## KEY DECISION POINTS IN THE DESIGN OF A SSAP

### PURPOSE/FOCUS

It is logical to keep in mind the educational purpose when designing any academic program. In addition to the academic value, there is an increased cultural intelligence that must be addressed in the creation of a new SSAP (Nolan & Kurthakoti, 2018). SSAPs could be designed to increase participation or affordability or to achieve a specific educational objective. Taiwan Program was designed to offer business students opportunity to learn more about Asia, especially Chinese culture and Chinese business environment. The Chinese economy is the second largest in the world and closely intertwined with the economy of the USA. At our university, out of three hundred international students, almost one-third are Chinese. However, we offered no coursework or SSAP related to Asian/Chinese culture or economy prior to the inception of Taiwan program. This is not unusual for most small liberal arts universities with limited resources. It was, however, a necessary component to creating a marketable program in a competitive market.

### PARTNERSHIPS (DOMESTIC & ABROAD)

The use of third-party service providers in the administration of SSAPs is becoming increasingly common. Industry related to education-tourism is growing and flourishing as students are learning through travel (Stone & Petrick, 2013). The operators provide the convenience of handling all the travel logistics and complimentary travel to certain number of faculty/staff depending on

the size of the group. The use of such services, however, adds cost to the participants. Taiwan program is innovative in this regard. It is based on a partnership with a host university in Taiwan, Study Abroad Office on campus and the College of Business and Economics.

Having a non-profit educational university as a host and organizer of all programming has decreased the cost and enriched participants' cultural experience. We work with the International Student Services and Chinese Language Center of the host university. A full-time staff member of the Chinese Language Center is dedicated to our group of students from the time they land at the airport until the time they depart. The person is available around the clock via phone, Facebook or texts. The coordinator works with her university to arrange all academic and non-academic programming as well as dorm accommodations. In addition, support services from our home institution are available to all study abroad students. This includes direct access to the Study Abroad staff, business faculty director, student life professionals, counseling services, and campus safety support services.

The Study Abroad Office on our campus was instrumental in finding the Taiwanese university. The Study Abroad Director had established relationship through his professional networks. He was instrumental in negotiating the original contract. Currently, our Study Abroad Office staff and business faculty accompany business students on alternate years. This practice allows enrichment activity for both faculty and staff and keeps the partnership strong. Benefits of such travel for professional growth of Business faculty are noted by Keese & O'Brien (2011) and they should implicitly be similar for study abroad staff members. The college and study abroad office also partner on recruitment of students, pre-departure orientation for participants and debriefing at the conclusion. Our university's curricula approval, transfer academic credits, classroom visits for recruitment, Business Advisory Council member endowment donor relations and academic program elements at the host university are handled by the business faculty who is the academic program director. Please see Figure 1 for the responsibilities of faculty director and study abroad office.

In summary, the use of a third party is convenient and expensive. It might be a preferred choice when lacking a committed faculty member or having a suitable host partner. With the help of study-abroad networks, finding a partner host institution that closely aligns with home institution can be very rewarding. Such relationship with a foreign institution provides students with more authentic experience and yields in closer ties with study-abroad office on home campus.

## **LENGTH OF THE PROGRAM**

A study abroad program is characterized as short-term when its length is less than eight-weeks long (Donnelly-Smith, 2009). A SSAP can be as short as a week (e.g., trips over spring break) while others are as long as six to eight weeks. When one-week long trips are often imbedded in a semester-long course challenges of making mandatory an additional expensive trip as part of the course or providing equivalent alternate assignments to those who choose not to participate need to be addressed. Often the focus of such trips is narrow. Stand-alone course of a week-long trip with additional assignments before and after the trip do exist as well (Wooldridge, Peet, Meyer, 2018).

According to Schulmann (2016), a body of research supports the idea that the personal and academic benefits of study abroad increase with the duration of the experience. There are, however, studies that argue that even SSAP can be impactful though their efficacy might be limited (Carly, Stuart & Dailey, 2011). Their examination of a two-week study program affirmed previous findings that such a short program could increase international outlook and interests. However, it did not support participants significantly increasing their international business appreciation and competence. This two week program also did not yield significant career benefits especially in the long run.

Taiwan Program is a six-week program. The length of the program was chosen because it was long enough for the host university to offer two three-credit courses, could accommodate the population of athletes, and could accommodate four enterprise visits and key weekend excursions. In our experience, the six-week duration was not an easy sell to the students but the participants found it to be impactful as noted in their feedback. This time frame did allow the participants to form lasting relationships with their learning partners - a benefit often associated with long-term study abroad programs (Schulmann, 2016).

In summary, very short programs (a week or two weeks long) can serve business schools well when the goal is to increase participation or to provide exposure to international business environment (Carly, Stuart & Dailey, 2011). However, longer duration is desirable if the educational goal is to enhance international business competence or lasting impact is to be achieved (Schulmann, 2016).

## **PRE-DEPARTURE PREPARATION**

Pre-departure meetings are necessary to pass along information related to the trip and complete university mandated paperwork such as liability waivers or health, safety, or emergency contact forms and such. Fewer but mandatory meetings are recommended about two months prior to the trip by Keese & O'Brien (2011).

Taiwan Program used a unique approach. It incorporated orientation information into a mandatory pass/fail spring course specifically designed for the participants. The course did not meet any academic degree requirements and the participants had the choice of auditing it. This course educated students on culture, language, travel, and Chinese business practices. In this collaborative course, the Taiwanese instructor taught Mandarin - a tonal language the concept of which was as foreign to our students as the Taiwanese culture. The business faculty led the discussion on the academic readings related to Chinese business practices. Program participants also interacted with international students from Taiwan, celebrated Chinese holidays and read articles on China-Taiwan history and culture. In addition, the Study Abroad Office accessed the class to provide pre-departure materials, collect/complete enrollment and liabilities forms, and communicate directly with the abroad institution prior to departure. This process promoted efficiency in the registration process, and communicating with the host institution regarding transcripts and other academic documents and processes.

## **ACADEMIC CREDITS AND STRUCTURE OF THE PROGRAM**

Most SSAPs are a blend of academic work, visits to business enterprises and cultural attractions. In this regard, our Taiwan Program is not unique. However, the way these elements are executed in the program is unique.

The program includes pairing of AU students with Providence University students. This design element created potential for lasting friendships - a feature often associated with longer-term study-abroad programs (Schulmann, 2016). It also yielded benefits such as having an in-country direct point-of-contact, a peer-aged leader to travel with, and an international student to simply converse with. The learning partners are often English or Communication majors. They benefit as participants in the summer program, as they are able to practice their English language skills with native English speakers.

Another unique element of the Taiwan program, similar to longer-term programs, was that students took host institution classes taught by the qualified host institution professors. In the morning, students studied Mandarin and linguistic history taught by the host university's Center for Chinese Language. Many business majors accepted the transfer credit for this course as an elective. In the afternoon, the students took a Management Seminar on Chinese Business Practices taught by a professor from the host university's Business Management department. The seminar was augmented with hands-on cultural classes such as a tea-making ceremony. This transfer credit was accepted as "special topics," elective credit by many business majors.

In addition to six transfer credits, the students were able to fulfill their requirement for business internship in the subsequent fall semester on campus by preparing an internship portfolio. The requirements for the internship portfolio were equivalent to regular internships completed through the summer by other students. While abroad, the students research and visit the companies they will evaluate in their internship portfolio. A questionnaire is provided to lead the students in their pre-analysis of the company. After visiting the company, the student takes all three experiences - pre, during, and post reflections - and prepares a comprehensive analysis of the companies. The intention is primarily to better understand foreign markets, and the global business sector as a whole.

## FINANCING

In 2018, the advertised cost for participation in the Taiwan Program was \$4500. According to our university's All Campus Survey - issued every other year for the past 10 years - cost has been the number one deciding factor as to whether a student participates in a trip. Of students interested in studying abroad, 60% of those students expect a tour to be under \$3000. Our institution recognizes globalization as a critical element to a formational education and incorporates this language in our University vision and mission statements. To support these ideals, \$20,000 of University funds are allocated annually as grants to students participating in study abroad experiences. Participants of Taiwan program were able to secure awards from these university funds.

In addition, for the Taiwan Program the business school connected with a university alumnus on the Business Advisory Council with career connections to Asia. He was willing to create an endowment specific for students participating in the trip. Participants of Taiwan program are able to earn scholarships from the earnings of this endowment.

Also, because students enroll in six-credit Taiwan Program at a partner institution, federal aid and summer loan funds are available, should they choose to file for these funds. Our financial aid office, in collaboration with our director of study abroad, advises this process.

To manage our costs and advertising, a three-year price contract is negotiated with the host university a year in advance of the expiration of the previous contract. Over the life of the program (8 years) the average out of pocket cost for students has been \$2,631 and the average scholarship and grant funded money is \$1,689. On the average, our students noted they spent \$600 during their time abroad. This includes food, souvenirs, personal trips and travel. The institutional and endowment scholarship awards allow the price of this six week program - with six summer semester credit hours and three fall semester hours to financially compete with other shorter programs on campus. In some instances, this trip is less expensive than a spring break ten-day tour in Europe.

## PROGRAM FEEDBACK

Common literature suggests that there is a significant relationship between the desire for individual growth, and the intent to study abroad (Pope, Sanchez, Lehnert, Schmid, 2013). Student learning outcomes, cross cultural competencies, global perspectives and global business can be taught and tracked in an academic environment, but other areas of development would include personal conceptions and understandings of the international education experience, and personal note of internal growth (Streitwieser & Light, 2018).

As part of the Taiwan Program, post-trip surveys are sent to participants to gain program insight. Student comments vary in length and sincerity. A typical review of the program is something along these lines:

"I had a huge increase in understanding how the US is viewed from other perspectives, as I got to know the views of students from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Switzerland, Spain and the UK. It was eye opening and humbling to learn how they thought of my country."

A majority of our students noted their greatest takeaway from the trip as "finding (having) the skills to cope with unfamiliar situations". Personal growth in our surveyed students was most often noted as the product of adapting to uncertainty. The feedback comments collected note the impactful overall experience for our business students in both an academic setting, as well as personal/social growth. In almost every group of students who participated, there was one student who had never been on an airplane.

The faculty and staff who accompanied the students also felt that they broadened their global perspective and understanding of cultural competencies as noted: "I feel that I will have an increased empathy and respect for international students taking my classes in the United States." One of the Study Abroad staff members who participated was first exposed to international travel as a student participant several years prior.

In addition, we gather the group together for debriefing after they return to the campus in the fall. Students also meet with the faculty-director one-on-one. Such design elements are desirable (Keese & O'Brien, 2011) and necessary for continuous improvement in the program.

## CONCLUSION

SSAP of longer length deserve consideration and they are not necessarily more expensive than very short programs especially when organized through non-profit educational institutions in host countries. Taiwan Program is a six-week summer program in partnership with a Taiwanese University. We advertise the program as our most affordable trip on campus regardless of the duration. Such programs have potential to harvest benefits similar to a semester long study abroad. Providing the opportunity for an immersion experience, while maintaining the close program oversight that a shorter program might offer, a program such as Taiwan Program can uniquely elevate student success in a globalized business world. For students who choose to participate early on in their college career, early internship experience and exposure to international markets allows directional discernment conversations to guide the remainder of their collegiate career.

The final data set outlined in Figure 2 offers some useful insights:

1. Many high-capability students (24 ACT average) needed a structured program to coax them into studying abroad.
2. Such structured program can accommodate students from freshmen to seniors excelling them in their course track or providing summer credit to students in need of credits. Many transfer students took advantage of the program to catch up on credits. Athletes were able to participate in the program as well.
3. Study abroad programs are dominated by females (Petrie, Murrell, and Schultz, 2018). This program was equally appealing to males and females. Home university was able to increase the percentage of males studying abroad.
4. Multiple faculty and staff are able to participate in the program making it an enrichment opportunity for faculty, staff and students.
5. This trip was highly impactful in offering an individually meaningful study-abroad experience to students without travel experience.

For such a program to exist, it has to be aligned with the mission of the institution and the college with strong support from the dean, department chairs and faculty with a committed faculty member willing to lead. Strong partnership across campus with study-abroad office, financial-aid, student-accounts and registrar result because assistance and cooperation of all is required.

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