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Short Study-Abroad Trips Can Have Lasting Effect, Research Suggests

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The length of time students study overseas has no significant impact on whether they become globally engaged later in life, according to researchers at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, a conclusion that is sure to add fuel to the already fiery debate over the efficacy of increasingly popular short-term study-abroad programs.

The findings of the Study Abroad for Global Engagement project, presented here on Thursday at the annual conference of the Forum on Education Abroad, suggest that students who go overseas for a short period of time, four weeks or less, are just as likely as those who study abroad for several months or even a year to be globally engaged.

"It's both exciting and disappointing," said Gerald W. Fry, a professor of international-development education at Minnesota and one of the study's principal investigators. "On one hand, you'd hope that studying in a country for a long period of time would be particularly meaningful." On the other, he said, the study's findings suggest that "if it's done right, if it's done with intensity of learning, a short-term program can have impact."

The Minnesota study, which surveyed nearly 6,400 graduates of 22 colleges who had studied overseas during the last five decades, sought to learn the ways in which those individuals had become globally engaged and the degree to which that engagement could be attributed to having studied abroad. The researchers defined engagement in several ways, including volunteerism and philanthropy, involvement in international and domestic political issues, and leadership in organizations that benefit the community and society.

The project was done in collaboration with the Forum on Education Abroad, a membership association of American and

overseas colleges and independent education-abroad providers, and supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

A Transformative Effect

The results of the survey, a summary of which will be posted on the project's Web site next week, found that study abroad did influence the participants to become more globally engaged.

Indeed, study-abroad alumni rated the experience as the most significant of their college years. Eighty-three percent of those surveyed said going overseas had a strong impact on their lives. By contrast, 73 percent of the respondents said college friendships and peer connections had a strong impact, while 66 percent listed course work as having such an effect.

That result is likely to come as no surprise to international educators, who have long argued that study abroad was transformative.

More startling, and potentially more controversial, is the finding that program duration, in and of itself, seems to matter little in predicting long-term global engagement.

Short-term programs, which are typically led by faculty members, have been rising in popularity, but skeptics have criticized them as being little more than cultural tourism, saying that in many of them students spend most of their time with other Americans and have little opportunity to immerse themselves in the local culture.

Advocates for such trips counter that they help make overseas study possible for students who might not be able to commit the time or have the financial resources to study for a semester or more.

Mr. Fry, who leads a short-term program to Thailand, said the study suggests that a more complex combination of factors makes a program effective. He and his colleagues hope to further mine the data to examine the interrelationship of a number of variables, such as whether students studied with other Americans or with foreign students.

Planning Worthwhile Trips

Also on Thursday, presenters at another session offered practical advice for crafting effective short-term programs. One key, they agreed, is to ensure that such programs, despite their brevity, have

a strong academic grounding.

Marlene Torp, associate director at the Danish Institute for Study Abroad, recalled talking with a student several years ago who had gone on a trip to Moscow organized by her group, a nonprofit overseas-study provider. The student, Ms. Torp said, was awed by the sites but frustrated because she felt that she didn't have the adequate background to ask thoughtful questions about what she was seeing. Since then, the institute has worked to carefully integrate both academic and cultural content into all of its programs.

"You see what you know," Ms. Torp said. "If you don't know anything, you don't see anything."

On college campuses, a large number of short-term trips are organized by faculty members. But the responsibilities involved—acting as travel agent, counselor, nurse, and resident director, in addition to teacher—can scare off some professors, said Michael Ulrich, associate director of international-education services at the University of Maryland at College Park. To alleviate some of the concerns, Mr. Ulrich said, he has tried to find funds so that faculty members can jointly lead trips. He has also worked with provider organizations, like Ms. Torp's group, to offer programs together.

Max Savishinsky, director of the University of Washington's Exploration Seminars, said he tries to work closely with faculty leaders on all aspects of their short-term programs, including recruiting students and providing training on health and safety, managing money, and mitigating risk. This summer, Washington faculty members will lead 45 trips abroad, and students on Exploration Seminars now account for about a third of those who study overseas, Mr. Savishinsky said.

Leading a study-abroad trip, Mr. Savishinsky said, is like having a child: "No one in their right mind would take on all the work and sacrifice and money and poop. But once you do it, you wouldn't have done anything differently."

The forum's annual conference, which drew more than 730 international educators, ends today.

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