

INTEGRATING STUDY ABROAD INTO A BUSINESS CURRICULUM: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that study abroad has substantial benefits for students. Barriers to semester study abroad include financial issues, the possibility of not graduating on time, and difficulties in fitting study abroad courses into degree programs (Doyle et al., 2009). Universities can address these concerns by negotiating costs with international partner universities and by developing plans of study that integrate study abroad courses into degree programs (curriculum integration). This paper presents a process for curriculum integration.

INTRODUCTION

In 2011, a regional comprehensive university in the southeastern United States initiated a Global Learning Initiative (GLI). The learning objectives for that program include “global knowledge, global attitudes, and global engagement”. The university has an International Center and a well-established study abroad program, with twenty partner universities. The GLI program includes a curriculum integration initiative, which is designed to give students in every undergraduate major an opportunity to study abroad for a semester and take courses that meet degree requirements, without delaying graduation. In each major, faculty were selected to identify at least two appropriate partner universities and prepare eight-semester plans of study that would meet those objectives. The plans of study will be used to help students make good decisions about study abroad, guide their course selections, and assist their advisors.

The College of Business at the university offers several degree programs, including a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration (BSBA), with twelve concentrations. This paper presents a process for developing the plans of study that were required for curriculum integration of the BSBA program.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There is a large body of literature related to the benefits of study abroad. One of the most ambitious studies was the Georgia Learning Outcomes of Students Studying Abroad Research Initiative (GLOSSARI), a carefully-designed study of academic outcomes of study abroad in 35 institutions in the University of Georgia system. (Redden, 2010). Study abroad students were compared with a control group that matched the institution, semester in college, and class standing of students who had studied abroad. The study concluded that study abroad improved both graduation rates and cumulative GPA. On these measures, African American students benefited more from study abroad than other ethnic groups; students who entered college with the lowest SAT scores benefited more from study abroad than those with higher scores. The GLOSSARI study also found that study abroad increases students’ intercultural knowledge.

Other research has also substantiated the benefits of study abroad. Researchers at Michigan State University found small, but statistically significant, gains in personal growth, intercultural awareness, professional development, and academic performance (Ingraham & Peterson, 2004). In this study, the length of study abroad ranged from three weeks to one semester. The benefits of study abroad were positively correlated with the length of study. In a related study, Black and Duhon (2006) assessed the impact of a one-month study abroad program in London on cultural adaptability. Using a pretest-posttest methodology, Black and Duhon (2006) found statistically significant gains in flexibility and openness, perceptual acuity, emotional resilience, and personal autonomy. In a third study, Lee, Therriault, and Linderholm (2012) administered standard tests of creative thinking to three groups of students: students who had studied abroad, students who planned to study abroad, and students who had not studied abroad and did not plan to do that. Students who had studied abroad performed better on tasks that required creative thinking than the other two groups of students. The length of study abroad was not reported.

Doyle et al. (2009) summarized research on barriers to study abroad. According to these authors, students are concerned about financial issues, the possibility of not graduating on time, and difficulties in fitting study abroad courses into their degree programs. Sanchez, Fornerino, and Zhang (2006) also identified financial issues as a barrier to study abroad.

The GLI curriculum integration initiative responds to research findings in three ways. First, the initiative focuses on semester study abroad, which has a greater impact than short-term programs. Second, the university's study abroad programs are less expensive than most other semester study abroad options. Third, the initiative provides plans of study that show students how to fit study abroad into their degree programs, without delaying graduation.

CURRICULUM INTEGRATION IN A COLLEGE OF BUSINESS

The author was assigned to develop plans of study for five BSBA concentrations: Health Care Management, Human Resources Management, International Business, Management, and Sustainable Business. For each concentration, there was an existing eight-semester plan of study for the home campus, showing the courses that a student would need to take in order to graduate. All plans of study followed the same basic format:

- Freshmen take general education courses and an Introduction to Business course.
- Sophomores continue with general education courses, which also taking foundation courses in economics, accounting, and statistics.
- Juniors and seniors take primarily core business courses and concentration courses.

Curriculum integration involved five steps:

1. Determine the most feasible times for students to study abroad.
2. Evaluate the universities with which we have exchange programs. Select two of these partner universities as the best places for our business students to study.
3. For those two universities, identify courses that could be taken there.
4. Develop templates for study abroad at each partner university.
5. For each concentration and each partner university, modify the existing plan of study to include a semester of study abroad at the partner university.

The Most Feasible Times to Study Abroad

Faculty members were especially interested in institutions where our students would be able upper-level business classes, particularly core courses. Taking upper-level business courses abroad may give students insight into the impact of culture on business. Most core courses can be taken in the first semester of the junior year, allowing students to spread concentration courses over their last three semesters at the home university. Also, students are probably less likely to encounter prerequisite issues with core courses than with concentration courses. Finally, juniors are likely to be more mature than freshmen and sophomores. A review of plans of study for the home campus showed that students in the International Business and Sustainable Business concentrations would be able to study abroad in the first semester of the junior year, if suitable courses could be found at partner universities.

While studying abroad during the first semester of the junior year seemed to be ideal, an analysis of existing plans of study showed that students in some concentrations would need to go abroad before that time, so that graduation would not be delayed. Our Health Care Management concentration requires four semesters to complete. The first semester of the junior year includes a required course that is specific to the United States and is offered only in the fall; this precludes study abroad during the first semester of the junior year. Students in the Management and Human Resources Management concentrations need to take Principles of Management in the first semester of the junior year, to meet a prerequisite requirement in the second semester of the junior year. Those students would need to (1) study abroad before the junior year, or (2) study at a university that offers Principles of Management in the fall semester.

Our partner universities do not accept freshmen for study abroad, and some do not accept first-semester sophomores. Therefore, if a student cannot study abroad during the first semester of the junior year, the most feasible time to study abroad is the second semester of the sophomore year. This means that our Health Care Management students should schedule study abroad in the second semester of the sophomore year.

Selecting Partner Universities for Study Abroad

The author's university has semester exchange programs with about twenty partner universities. The first step was to identify partner universities that have business degree programs and offered several undergraduate core courses in business that are compatible with our curriculum. There were four partner universities that met those requirements:

- Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia
- American University in Cairo, Egypt
- The Florida State University campus in Panama City, Panama
- Kingston University in London, United Kingdom

The American University in Cairo was eliminated from consideration because of political unrest in Egypt, which could create an unsafe situation for students. Each of the other three institutions had attracted business students in the past. There was anecdotal evidence that each had provided positive experiences for students. Deakin and Kingston have been among our most popular study abroad programs. The Florida State campus in Panama has attracted a much smaller number of students. For this reason, a decision was made to develop plans of study for Deakin and Kingston. If there was a concentration where neither Deakin nor Kingston was workable, Florida State in Panama would be a good choice.

Course Selection

The next step was to review course offerings at Deakin and Kingston universities and select courses that are appropriate for transfer credit. Both partner universities provide course listings and course descriptions for inbound study abroad students on their Web sites. General Education courses were reviewed according to the home university's general education requirements. The following questions were used to review core business courses and foundation courses:

- Is the course substantially equivalent to the corresponding course in our program?
- If the study abroad course requires a prerequisite, will our students have taken the prerequisite before they study abroad?
- If the course is a prerequisite to a more advanced course in the BSBA program, will the study abroad course enable students to succeed in the advanced course?
- Is the course offered in the semester when our students would need to take it? For most general education courses, this was the spring semester. Core business courses were needed in the fall semester. With some adjustments in plans of study, Business Statistics II and Managerial Accounting could be taken in either semester.

Courses that met the requirements described above were referred to appropriate administrators for approval. Table 1 shows the approved courses. Except as noted, these courses are available in both the fall and spring semesters. Both Deakin and Kingston also offer elective courses that can be used to complete a schedule.

Table 1
Approved Study Abroad Courses
Semester Hours in Parentheses

| | Deakin University | Kingston University |
|--------------------------------|---|--|
| General Education Requirements | Global Perspectives (3) Humanities and Arts (3) Social Science (3) | Global Perspectives (4) Humanities and Arts (4) Natural Science (4) (spring) |
| Foundation | Managerial Accounting (3) | Business Statistics II (4) (fall) |
| Business Core | Management Information Systems (3) Principles of Management (3) Principles of Marketing (3) | Operations Management (4) (fall) Principles of Finance (3) (fall) Principles of Marketing (4) (fall) |

In developing templates for study abroad, differences in course load and credit hours per course must be considered. At the author's university, the normal course load is 15-16 hours, and most courses earn three credits. Courses at Deakin University also earn three credits, but the normal course load for incoming study abroad students is 12 hours. A student can request permission to take 15 hours, but permission is not always granted. A student who is limited to 12 hours at Deakin will need either a summer course or an 18-hour semester later.

At Kingston, the standard course load is 15-16 hours, and most courses earn 4 credits. Since a student needs only four courses to earn 15-16 hours, a semester at Kingston will eliminate 3-4 general elective hours from the student's degree program.

Table 1 was used to develop templates for study abroad semesters at each of the two partner universities. The plans of study for Deakin and Kingston are based on those templates, which are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Study Abroad Templates

| | Deakin University | Kingston University |
|---|---|---|
| Study abroad during the fall semester of the junior year | Management Information Systems (3) Principles of Management (3) Principles of Marketing (3) Elective (3) | Business Statistics II (4) Operations Management (4) Principles of Marketing (4) Principles of Finance (3) OR Global Perspectives (4) |
| Study abroad during the spring semester of the sophomore year | Managerial Accounting (3) Global Perspectives (3) Humanities and Arts (3) Social Science (3) | Global Perspectives (4) Humanities and Arts (4) Natural Science (4) Elective (4) |

As stated earlier, our Management and Human Resources Management students need to take Principles of Management in the first semester of the junior year. The plans of study for those concentrations are based on study at Deakin University in the first semester of the junior year, or at Kingston University in the second semester of the sophomore year.

Creating Plans of Study for Study Abroad

A four-step process was used to create plans of study.

1. Select the study abroad template for the desired university and semester from Table 2.
2. Start with the standard plan of study for the concentration. Remove courses that will not be taken abroad from the study abroad semester.
3. Move study abroad courses from their original semester to the study abroad semester.
4. Assign the courses that were removed to other semesters. Additional adjustments may be needed to balance the course load across semesters.

The process of creating a plan of study for the International Business concentration at Kingston will be used as an example. Table 3 compares the last five semesters of the standard plan of study and the plan of study for Kingston in the fall semester of the junior year.

The following changes were made in the original plan of study.

1. The courses to be taken at Kingston were inserted in Semester 5. One course was moved from Semester 4, and two were moved from Semester 6. Global Perspectives stayed in Semester 5.
2. A general education requirement in Natural Science was moved from Semester 6 to Semester 4.
3. Principles of Finance, Principles of Management, and Business Communication, which had been in Semester 5, were assigned to Semester 6.
4. An International Culture elective was from Semester 5 was assigned to Semester 7, replacing an elective. As expected, the number of general electives was reduced from three to two.

The new plan of study was complete.

Table 3
 Creating a Plan of Study for Study Abroad
 International Business Option at Kingston University

| | Original Plan | Study Abroad Plan |
|---|--|--|
| Sophomore Year Spring Semester (Semester 4) | Managerial Accounting Macroeconomics Business Statistics II Critical Reading, Thinking, and Writing Foreign Language 102 | Managerial Accounting Macroeconomics Critical Reading, Thinking, and Writing Natural Science (from Sem. 6) Foreign Language 102 |
| Junior Year Fall Semester (Semester 5) | Principles of Finance Principles of Management Business Communication Global Perspectives International Culture Elective | Business Statistics II (from Sem. 4) Operations Management (from Sem. 6) Principles of Marketing (from Sem. 6) Global Perspectives |
| Junior Year Spring Semester (Semester 6) | Management Information Systems Sustainable Operations Principles of Marketing Natural Science Elective (300 level or above) | Management Information Systems Principles of Finance (from Sem. 5) Principles of Management (from Sem. 5) Business Communication (from Sem. 5) Elective (300 level or above) |
| Senior Year Fall Semester (Semester 7) | International Trade and Investment Global Marketing Business Law Technical Writing Elective | International Trade and Investment Global Marketing Business Law Technical Writing International Culture Elective (from Sem. 5) |
| Senior Year Spring Semester (Semester 8) | Business Policy International Finance International Management International Business Internship OR International Field Experience Elective | Business Policy International Finance International Management International Business Internship OR International Field Experience Elective |

SUMMARY

Research suggests that study abroad has substantial benefits for students. Study abroad at partner universities, where costs have been negotiated, is a cost-effective choice for students. Curriculum integration can make it easier for students to study abroad, without delaying graduation. Curriculum integration involves (1) identifying the most feasible times for students in each degree program and concentration to study abroad, (2) selecting appropriate partner universities for study abroad, and (3) developing plans for study abroad at those universities. A process for implementing curriculum integration in a College of Business has been described. The plans of study will be used to help students make good decisions about study abroad and course selections. It is hoped that the availability of these plans will encourage more students to consider study abroad. Since partner universities change their curricula from time to time, it will be important to monitor the curriculum at each partner university and update the plans of study when needed.

At the author's university, curriculum integration does not limit student choice. Business students will still be able to take advantage of other approved study abroad programs offered by the College of Business, the university, study abroad providers, and other universities.

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