

Theory-to-Practice

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## ***Study Abroad: Toward Fulfillment of a Critical U.S. Need for More Culturally Sensitive Volunteers***

**Opal Leeman Bartzis**

### **Abstract**

This article frames the need for skilled volunteers as a global concern with local urgency. Volunteers with cultural sensitivity are critically required in the U.S., particularly as communities become increasingly diverse and debates over access to services happen locally and nationally. Study abroad participation uniquely prepares people to meet that need. Through a survey of literature and research and an examination of program availability, recognition of the connection between the intercultural skills and understanding gained through study abroad experiences and the development of volunteers who possess the cultural empathy necessary to appropriately support communities throughout the U.S. is encouraged.

### **Volunteering is Important across Cultures**

Volunteers who are dedicated, enthusiastic, and well-suited for their roles are surely valued not only in the United States, but in most, if not all, cultures. A quick exploration of this assertion readily reveals several useful examples.

In the United Kingdom in 2000 (Bussell & Forbes, 2008), employers were encouraged by the Prime Minister to grant employees one day off per year to volunteer through an initiative known as Employer Supported Volunteering (ESV). Follow-up investigation confirmed that as part of this initiative, connections to the community through volunteering were recommended and are now being undertaken.

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**Opal Leeman Bartzis**, Director of Custom and Collaborative Programs, Ball State University.

Northern Ireland's Volunteer Development Agency (Volunteer Now, 2012) estimated in 2007 that 35 percent of the population is engaged in some form of volunteerism and described the value of volunteerism in ways that associate it with active citizenship, an expression of the individual's freedom to choose, influence on social change, and as "a reciprocal gift relationship that meets the needs of organizations and volunteers" (p. 2).

Research (Yoda, 2010) indicates that participation levels in volunteerism in Japan may be low, but that the rate of interest in volunteering is double the rate of action. Thus, innovative ideas aimed at increasing participation are being explored; one example includes promoting 'voluntourism' as a means of introducing individuals to issues and needs outside of their local communities, thus turning Japanese citizens' interest into volunteer action.

A report (Hilding, 2010) that compared volunteer activities among employees at the Swedish branch of an American company with those who were U.S.-based revealed that the Americans were typically more engaged in volunteerism. However, through a company program aimed at increasing employees' social engagement, the Swedish workers showed evidence of increasing appreciation of the obvious and subtle value of volunteerism; as the report concluded, "employee volunteering is good both for the company and for society" (p. 12).

Thus, we can clearly see from these few examples that volunteering is valued internationally and that its development and nurturing is clearly a global concern, not one that is confined exclusively to the U.S. Realizing this, it is therefore important to have cross-cultural perspectives in mind when beginning a conversation about the development of the best possible volunteers to serve the increasingly diverse communities within the U.S. Let us consider how cross-cultural thinking and sensitivity can directly impact the quality of such volunteers.

### **Volunteers with Cultural Sensitivity: A Critical Need within U.S. Cultures**

Norris and Gillespie (2008) have pointed to world events and the rapid diversification of American society as reasons why volunteers with intercultural skills and cultural empathy are especially needed, writing "our post-9/11 world needs culturally sensitive Americans to engage in work and volunteer efforts alongside all people" (p. 1). They also recognized that such individuals may be fewer in number than needed, de-

scribing a “great demand for employees with international experience” (p. 1). Norris and Gillespie found that “a severe shortage [that] exists in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors in the United States,” (p. 1) will increase the demand for such individuals.

Additional calls for culturally sensitive volunteers can be found in varied sources. Heath et al. (2009) examined the mental health services offered to children following disasters and discovered that there was a demonstrated need for relief organizations to recruit volunteers with cultural sensitivity. Pointing out how emergency services following disasters tend to focus almost exclusively on basic survival needs and the restoration of community stability, they called for strengthened efforts toward providing culturally sensitive school-based mental health services for affected children.

Burke (2001) described the correlation between parent and community volunteer participation in secondary schools and a significant influence on student achievement. His findings culminated in recommendations that middle and high school principals attempt to recruit such individuals “to nurture the academic success of culturally and economically diverse community groups” (abstract). One can imagine that such needs for volunteers who are prepared to interact positively with students from various backgrounds, faiths and ethnicities will only increase as the U.S. becomes ever more culturally diverse.

Such pleas for recognition of the value of and need for culturally sensitive volunteers may be increasing, but they are not new. In a study of the effects of cross-cultural awareness and Spanish language training, Gonzalez-Lee and Simon (1987) found that cultural sensitivity displayed by health care volunteers undertaking their preceptorships could address what they identified as a “need to overcome language and cultural barriers” (p. 502) and to “understand the concepts of health and illness prevalent in other cultures” (p. 502) in Latino communities. The results of their study prompted their advocacy for what they described as a “working level of cross-cultural sophistication” (p. 502) in health care volunteers and, indeed, in medical professionals.

Highlighting the critical nature of some situations, Sorenson and Golding (1988) provided an insightful report on the prevalence of suicide attempts among Mexican-Americans that demonstrated the critical need for volunteers with specialized skills. Within their suggestions for addressing this important topic, they offered, “one very pragmatic expansion of suicide prevention efforts would be to employ more culturally sensitive volunteers on suicide prevention hotlines and to make this

known in the Hispanic community” (p. 331). Again, one can easily observe that issues associated with immigrant needs have intensified since Sorenson and Golding’s and Gonzalez-Lee and Simon’s recommendations were published; and, it can only be expected that many other issues will accompany the current political debate surrounding immigrant access to programs and services.

Supporting this theme, although focused on the importance of U.S. teachers with cultural sensitivity, Aglazor (2012) emphasized the undeniable fact that minorities, as a group, now constitute the majority in many American communities. She called for the critically needed infusion of student teaching abroad opportunities in U.S. teacher education programs, asserting that multicultural experiences, and the new perspectives they foster, are a necessary aspect of educator preparation and warns that without this change in approach “the racial gap between students and teachers will continue to widen” (abstract).

Can participation in study abroad really help? What happens when U.S. students study abroad? Is there a relationship between the intercultural skills they gain, the kinds of individuals they return as, and the volunteers many of them eventually become or could become?

### **Study Abroad Fosters the Development of Cultural Sensitivity**

Study abroad scholars and practitioners have long understood the connection between cross-cultural experiences and the development of intercultural awareness (Vande Berg, 2007), particularly when students’ encounters with new ways of thinking and living are discussed with them in settings that guide and prompt critical reflection. Such interventions and cultural coaching (Marx & Moss, 2011) can turn what has the potential to be a shocking experience that culminates in the rejection of new ideas and beliefs into an adjustment experience that leads to acceptance and appreciation of differences. Such cultural sensitivity is an ideal characteristic for a volunteer in the U.S. to possess.

Many study abroad programs (Institute for Study Abroad, Butler University; Arcadia University: The College of Global Studies) offer volunteer experiences as an enrichment of the core study experience; others include volunteering as a compulsory component; and still others focus on volunteering as the sole program purpose. We may suppose that participation in a volunteer abroad program or a study abroad program with a significant volunteer element may foster a deeper level of cultural sensitivity than that which is encouraged by study abroad programs that

do not place such emphasis on volunteering, but we do not yet have the findings to support such a belief. What seems evident, however, is that participation in study programs, no matter the extent to which volunteering is featured within those programs, fosters the development of cultural awareness; and, study abroad returnees can utilize their developed skills and dispositions to volunteer in ways that are meaningful to the many cultures within the U.S.

Norris and Gillespie (2008) present findings from a survey conducted by the Institute for the International Education of Students of its 17,000 program participants over a nearly 50-year period, which sought to illuminate the ways in which study abroad participation shaped alumni pursuit of paid and unpaid positions with international foci. By examining those participants who reported that they eventually worked or volunteered for international organizations, important and obvious conclusions were drawn about the connection between study abroad and intercultural career and volunteer pathways.

Similarly, Wallace (1999), who examined the affects of Pomona College study abroad program participants a full decade later, found that 59 percent of the 48 interviewed felt that their career paths were directly impacted by the overseas experience. Wallace also found that they attributed their intercultural awareness and appreciation of diversity to having studied abroad.

Volunteers who are inter-culturally minded do not, as might be expected, always confine their efforts to domestic organizations, as Norris and Gillespie (2008) discovered when investigating the activities in which their former program participants were engaged. "Indeed, many Americans who study abroad during college go on to work or volunteer outside the United States or for international organizations in the United States" (p. 2). Their research revealed that many of those involved in international work, at least eight percent, were volunteering for nonprofit agencies at the time of the study; 48 percent of their respondents reported "working or volunteering in an international capacity at some point since college" (p.5) (with this being defined as working in a foreign setting or working in an internationally-focused position within the U.S.).

Finally, the study by Norris and Gillespie presented evidence that individuals who study abroad often intentionally seek work or volunteer opportunities that are cross-cultural in nature, surmising that "the education abroad experience leads many participants to actively seek an international dimension to their paid and volunteer work" (p. 7). All of this supports the need for culturally sensitive volunteers and recognition

of the fact that study abroad programs can prepare such individuals to meet that need.

Thus, we can find quantitative, qualitative and simply anecdotal support for the claim that study abroad fosters the acquisition of special skills. We can also assert that having such skills uniquely position the study abroad returnee among those who are most likely to become culturally sensitive volunteers.

### **Structuring Effective Study Abroad Programs**

As practitioners, we should be concerned with structuring study abroad programs so that they maximize opportunities for the development of cultural sensitivity in participants. First and foremost, as we know from Kolb (1984), individuals must actively participate in their learning when in an unfamiliar culture in order to truly grow from the experience. Study abroad programs should engage students with their host communities as much as possible, allowing them to be full participants in the local culture, as opposed to merely witnesses.

Care should be given to all aspects of program development, from choice of activities to student housing and the connections between the academic and interpersonal components of the program. Visits to historical sites and iconic venues are certainly valuable, but so too are the interactions students have with locals in the corner supermarket or neighborhood café. Housing integrated with host culture students, or, better yet, host family situations, allow study abroad participants to deepen their cultural sensitivity, through their daily conversations and exposure to local life.

Lewin (2009) goes further, stating that study abroad students “need opportunities to participate in civic projects to learn how to work alongside people from across the world to cultivate the habits of mind and action that will promote further engagement in the future” (p. 10). In this way, students learn about the challenges faced by their host communities from an insider perspective and gain critical experience from working positively in concert with locals toward a goal. Study abroad programs that afford participants this kind of engagement, through volunteering or service learning, for example, are ideal.

It is also important for study abroad programs to include education on intercultural communication, allowing students to learn constructive ways of interacting with the diverse individuals they encounter while abroad and to develop appreciation for the perspectives and values that

shape them. In this way, the student and the host community are more likely to benefit from the student's sojourn, and a foundation can be built upon which the student's intercultural learning can continue beyond the conclusion of the program.

Citron and Kline (2001) assert that effective study abroad programs include training on intercultural communication but also caution that such education should not stereotype the host culture nor stifle the cultural values and perspectives of minorities. According to Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich (2002), "cooperative learning, dialogue, and constructive conflict cannot be restricted only to the community of learners themselves but must involve diverse members of the host community, as people from the host culture are the true experts regarding their own lives and culture" (p. 58). Moreover, they caution, being isolated with one's peers provides incomplete learning. Effective study programs prompt students to think beyond their visiting student community and the accepted definitions of their host culture and to consider the myriad groups and individuals with whom they are surrounded.

As explained by Citron and Kline (2001) and Vande Berg (2007), structured mentoring during the study abroad experience in the form of a 'cultural coach' can aid students in gaining understanding from new cultures, as opposed to becoming alienated from them. Brubaker's (2006) observations of study abroad participants led her to assert that "while students grappled with deeper subjective elements of culture while abroad, they still needed guidance, in the form of culture learning strategies and a vocabulary for investigating, articulating, and processing their observations, experiences, interactions, reactions, and feelings" (abstract). A solid study abroad program, therefore, would intentionally include time and staff dedicated to facilitating reflection and thought-provoking discussion of the study abroad experience as it occurs. Without this element, individuals may become critical of and distanced from the host culture, thereby blocking the possibility of intercultural growth.

Finally, study abroad program developers must not shy away from the core fact that there are differences among us, but should instead ask students to confront it. No two persons, nor two communities, are the same. As Irvine (2003) states simply, "recognizing that 'difference makes a difference' should change how we think" (p. 74). We must learn to interact with individuals in ways that positively take differences into account, identifying and valuing them, but also, more importantly, responding thoughtfully in relation to them. If we want volunteers who are able to provide effective services to diverse individuals and communi-

ties, we must, as stated by Irvine, acknowledge and respond to “our differences in ethnicity, social class, gender, sexual orientation and physical condition” (p. 71).

The research of Anderson et al. (2006) indicates that regardless of program duration and language immersion, cultural sensitivity can be an outcome of study abroad. They further find that the development of cultural sensitivity is crucial to one’s ability to successfully navigate within varied cultural groups. Given this potential of well-structured study abroad programs to foster sensitivity to the attitudes, beliefs and values of other cultures, study abroad returnees can be seen as among the most qualified to fulfill volunteer positions in the U.S.

### **Recommendations for Study Abroad Programming and Research**

Through study abroad, students can develop intercultural skills that make them ideally suited for critical volunteer positions at home, and increased recognition of this correlation is recommended. Additionally, the creation of more study abroad programs offering volunteer opportunities as core requirements or complementary components is worthy of consideration. Research examining the degree to which cultural empathy is fostered within students through volunteer abroad programs as opposed to study abroad programs that lack volunteer elements would be useful.

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