



## The GAPS Think Piece - Issue 15

# Global Education and Non-Traditional Students: Developing Study Abroad Programs and Bridging Cultural Gaps

*Amanda Eakins*  
*Int. Associate Director of Operations*  
*Idaho State University, Graduate School*  
*Member, Kappa Delta Pi*

*Volkan Aktas*  
*Int'l Admissions & Recruitment Assistant*  
*President, Graduate Student Association*  
*Idaho State University, Graduate School*

Limited research exists on the non-traditional learner because of the diversity of this student population. Still, we recognize that the challenges that plague non-traditional students negatively impact their learning potential. As such, professors and administrators must cultivate curriculum that delivers academic rigor while considering the effects of such curriculum on the non-traditional student. Universities must be resourceful in developing opportunities that are mindful of students and their need to participate, both in offering international courses and in providing a higher education experience that is congruent with the opportunities offered to traditional students. While study abroad programs by themselves convey no value to an employer, the knowledge obtained from study abroad programs offers cultural awareness that the student might otherwise miss. These experiences can later translate into leadership and communication skills, tolerance of others, and the development of societal and ethical insights, which are invaluable in the workforce. It is important that we expose our students to different cultures if we are to broaden their educational journey and provide them with insight into neighboring countries' customs and traditions. Such an aim will be possible through concrete development of programs focused on increasing the reach of pedagogical instruction on a global scale for adult learners.

### **Understanding the Non-traditional Student**

Non-traditional students are the new emerging student population on university campuses across the globe. These students' tenacity for work, often simultaneously caring for family members, while embarking on a new academic journey, offers new challenges to the paradigm of the modern student.



Munro (2011) makes a compelling argument about how these encounters disturb the academic trajectory of the non-traditional student. The obligatory life/work responsibilities existing outside the academic realm greatly affect the overall academic journey of the learner.

In higher education, non-traditional students face a myriad of challenges that undermine their ability to participate in and take advantage of international programs. However, if administrators at higher educational institutions effectively foresee the needs of their non-traditional students during the primary phase of a program's development, they could cultivate a platform whereby participation in such cultural experiences is met with minimal disruption to work/personal life related obligations.

### **International Programs**

Some Predominately White Institutions (PWI), nestled in the Northwestern region of the United States, have a population which prides itself on minimal levels of diversity, comprising a racial makeup that is more than 85% white with other groups like, Latino(a), Blacks, Asians, Native Americans and International students comprising less than 15% of the student body. These demographics tend to also be reflected in the makeup of the area's major public universities. Though some universities have implemented aggressive strategies to increase diversity within their communities, such as the development of a five-year strategic-plan that includes specific language about equity and inclusion, administrators continue to see stagnation in their efforts to cultivate a more diverse student body. Thus, the international study abroad programs at those universities continue to play a major role in whether or not students are given access to cross-cultural exchanges with individuals from neighboring countries.

While international programs are successful in bridging cultural gaps on a global platform, the focus of these programs is tailored predominantly for traditional students. Little to no emphasis is directed towards the non-traditional student, though they comprise more than 21% of the undergraduate student population. For this reason, we must create programs with the primary focus of expanding the accessibility of study abroad programs to non-traditional students;



post-secondary institutions need to revolutionize the way they facilitate study abroad programs. This new development would afford non-traditional students with opportunities to gain valuable international experiences which will ultimately improve the way they see and interact with citizens across the globe.

## **Marketing and Community Outreach**

Most tertiary establishments place little to no effort on the specific elements that may influence students' involvement or interest in an international program (de Jong, Schnusenber, & Goel, 2010). However, if international programs are to be effective, marketing schemes must focus on the measures that are compulsory to stimulate student involvement and engagement in study abroad programs. As such, promotional materials should focus on (1) the value of the study abroad programs for the adult learner; (2) the strengths of the international programs and how they will bring value to non-traditional academic studies; and (3) the low cost of the program, along with scholarship and financial aid opportunities to cover its cost.

One barrier to the overall success of study abroad programs is financial accessibility. According to de Jong, Schnusenber, & Goel, (2010), understanding the overall expense of the program and how the fixed cost will impact the number of students needed for the success of the program should be a consideration for finance directors. Directors need to study the trends of university diversity and the regions that are of most interest to students. The complete cost of international programs should be funded by scholarships and or financial aid.

It is important to understand the dynamics of the student population and develop a plan to realize success in these programs. Developing a strategic marketing plan will allow educators to focus on the challenges that non-traditional students in higher education often face through the recruitment process. A marketing plan will also allow administrators to develop a program that permits non-traditional students to cultivate the technical skills necessary for the workforce, while also allowing them to learn and nurture tolerance of individuals from different cross-cultural backgrounds.



## **Program Development**

Within the past few years, we are seeing more degree programs offering study abroad programs within their curriculum. We are also seeing more universities allocating financial resources to the development of study abroad programs for their student population. With these new developments, what is important is that students view these trips as an opportunity to gain an invaluable intercultural experience and not merely as a foreign trip, a passport marker, or another chapter in their personal life. The need for incorporating diversity in the classroom continues to grow; this growth is credited to the increase of racial and ethnic groups within the United States. However, students within the United States must overcome the lack of intercultural competencies that arise from their lack of experience with cross-cultural exchange (Flaherty, Wright, McMillen, 2009). To combat these challenges, universities must create opportunities in higher education which incorporate a more global approach through the development of study abroad programs for both traditional *and* non-traditional students. These programs would offer the necessary intercultural exposure students need in order to develop multiculturalism, sensitivity and tolerance.

Study abroad programs are meant to introduce students to the lifestyles and practices of other cultures in neighboring countries (Womble, De'Armond, & Babb, 2014). In addition to making these experiences available for students, study abroad programs have a responsibility to ensure that the curriculum meets faculty standards within the classroom. If faculty values and norms were reflective, then the goals and objectives set forth by external accreditation bodies will be evident in the curriculum (Womble, De'Armond, & Babb, 2014). How do we translate curriculum design to reflect positive student experiences? Ideally, the factors that should be considered in the development of study abroad programs should encompass the values and overall mission of the degree program. Furthermore, a director should consider the regulations and expectations of its program and accrediting bodies (Womble, De'Armond, & Babb, 2014).



While the curricula of study abroad programs provide no direct correlation to a student's field of study, study abroad programs do provide an avenue for students to interact with their peers residing in different countries, thus, increasing the global reach of academia. Study abroad programs provide, not just an avenue for students to increase their knowledge about different cultures, but the opportunity for students to cultivate their interpersonal and leadership skills which can be beneficial to their employers (Harder, Andenoro, Roberts, Stedman, Newberry, Parker, & Rodriguez, 2015). International programs should incorporate functions that will allow interested non-traditional students the opportunity to engage in study abroad openings with minimal setbacks due to personal life obligations.

### **Accountability**

Accountability in study abroad programs is difficult to gauge because they are infrequently tied to learning outcomes in the classroom. Instead, the focus tends to be on the quantity of participating students rather than on the quality of the program (Tarrant, Rubin, & Stoner, (2013). To this end, limited research exists on performance frameworks for study abroad programs. What we do know is that administrators and educators should incorporate best practices in their curricula development to ensure academic rigor for their students. Hamza (2009) discusses the opportunities for professional development and transformative learning that educators can acquire through their participation in international programs. Though the importance of the role of international programs continues to be an unknown factor due to the marginal research conducted on this topic, Hamza (2009) denotes the transformative opportunities presented from employee engagement within international platforms.

International programs expose workers to transformative learning which modifies how individuals process their experiences with different cultures (Hamza, 2009). Though the research is nominal, universities understand the need for cross-border partnerships with peer institutions. They also understand the impact study abroad programs can have on the way academics interact with international students within the classroom (Hamza, 2009). The definitive test of student preparation for the global community is how they interact with other postgraduates as they enter the workforce.



Students who participate in international programs should develop a newfound tolerance for others. These cultural experiences abroad should support the ideals of greater global awareness, becoming a beacon for the way we measure accountability. If we are to hold study abroad programs accountable for the teaching of cultural acceptance, through research we must develop strategies aimed at examining the success of the program that go beyond student experiences and enrollment numbers.

## **Conclusion**

While faculty has been developing their own curriculum for the pedagogical instruction of their students for centuries, study abroad programs provide a few challenges with curriculum design. It is important that faculty consider the practices and norms of the country they will be visiting. Additionally, the makeup of every program will differ depending on the country their student body will be visiting. In all, the success of international programs will be dependent on how well faculty can marry the needs of the students with the expectations of the institution and external accrediting bodies.

Program developers should understand the limitations of their programs and the value that they create for students within the economy. Accountability for international programs should encompass evidence that highlights the outcomes of the program in which students clearly demonstrate tolerance for others thus becoming global citizens. Additionally, understanding the challenges facing the non-traditional student is important if we are to become successful in evolving international programs to meet the needs of such a diverse student body. The ability to bridge those challenges that adversely influence the students' educational journey, with resources that will (a) encourage, (b) support and (c) impact the non-traditional student as global citizens, will be an appealing element in this new initiative.



**Amanda Eakins** is the Interim Associate Director of Graduate School Operations, at Idaho State University (ISU), Idaho, USA. Her professional experience is enriched by a Bachelor's of Science in Management and a Masters of Education in Teaching and Learning with a student services cognate. As of late, she is also a student in the Doctorate of Education in Leadership and Management Program at St. Thomas University, Florida, USA. She is the Advisor of the Graduate Student Association (GSA), Co-Advisor of the Black Students Association (BSA), and Women of Color Association (WOCA) at ISU. In addition, Amanda is involved in numerous organizations including Kappa Delta PI (KDP) and the Association of Non-Traditional Students in Higher Education (ANTSHE). She is a native of St. Lucia, W.I. but calls St. Croix, U.S.V.I. her home. Amanda's research focuses on success strategies for students from marginal populations at post-secondary institutions.

**Volkan Aktas** is the International Admissions and Recruitment Assistant at Idaho State University Graduate School. He is also the President of the Graduate Student Association and serves in this capacity to facilitate relationships and address organizational concerns between the Graduate School and current graduate students. His academic background includes a Bachelors of Business Administration with a concentration in Marketing. He is currently a candidate for a Master's of Public Administration. His research is focused on the impact immigration has on education and multiculturalism within a globalized world. Volkan would like to serve the public administration sector and further explore how policy approaches meet cultural diversity. Following his graduation from the MPA program, Volkan hopes to join a multinational institution or organization. His research and studies will enhance his ability to understand functional mechanisms behind multinational institutions and organizations. Volkan's aim is to join policy efforts to help global organizations operate more efficiently within the globalized world.

### References

- Clarke III, I. B., Wright, N. D., & McMillen, R. M. (2009, August). Student Intercultural Proficiency From Study Abroad Programs. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 31(2), 173-181.
- de Jong, P., Schnusenberg, O., & Goel, L. (2010). Marketing study abroad programs effectively: What do American business students think? *Journal of International Education in Business*, 3(1), 34-52.
- Hamza, A. (2009, February 4). International Experience, an Opportunity for Professional Development in Higher Education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 14(1), 50-69.
- Harder, A., Andenoro, A., Roberts, T. G., Stedman, N., Newberry, M., III, Parker, S. J., & Rodriguez, M. T. (2015). Does Study Abroad Increase Employability? *NACTA Journal*, 59(1), 41-48.
- Munro, L. (2011). 'Go boldly, dream large!': The challenges confronting non-traditional students at university. *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(2), 115-131.
- Tarrant, M. A., Rubin, D. L., & Stoner, L. (2013). The Added Value of Study Abroad: Fostering a Global Citizenry. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 18(2), 141-161.
- Womble, L., De'Armond, D., & Babb, J. (2014). A Model For Designing Faculty-Led Study Abroad Programs in the Business Curriculum. *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal*, 18(3), 93-110.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of GAPS.