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Global studies abroad: toward a more integrated and meaningful study abroad experience

May 7, 2010 | Volume 4 | Issue 2
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Most undergraduate students majoring in global studies will spend some portion of their academic career studying abroad. Indeed, the “study abroad requirement” is

seen as an essential component of the global studies degree at many institutions, as it provides students with an opportunity to immerse themselves in another culture and actively engage with the issues and problems they study in the classroom. But does simply including a study abroad component in a global studies major ensure that students will actually immerse and engage? Given the subject matter of our nascent field, should we be expecting something more, or at least different, for our students when they study abroad?

I found myself asking those questions as my institution undertook a significant overhaul of its global studies program. Considerable time was spent on the interdisciplinary curriculum, the number of credit hours, the arrangement of thematic tracks and regional concentrations, and the suite of courses that would sit at the core of the major. Study abroad, meanwhile, was barely discussed – it was simply a given. Our revised curriculum places much more emphasis on the processes and flows of globalization than before, incorporating but not privileging area studies at the level of the nation-state while addressing the increasing interconnectivity of society at all scales. We have adopted the metaphors of networks (Castells, 2000) and flows (Appadurai, 1996) as we seek to understand how globalization is changing our world. Yet our mentality toward study abroad programs seems to remain rooted in the paradigm of place. “I want to study in Ecuador,” is an example of the typical response given by a student when asked about the study abroad requirement. We may debate the “end” or “demise” of the nation-state in our classrooms (Ohmae, 1996; Tanzi, 1998), but when it comes to study abroad the nation-state seems alive and well. Steiner asks of global studies in an earlier issue of this journal, “what is the unit of analysis?” (Steiner, 2007). We know the answer is not the nation-state (or at least not solely), yet too often that is the spatial construct we apply to our thinking on study abroad programs.

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It seems appropriate and legitimate to argue that perhaps global studies students and those who teach and advise them should approach the study abroad requirement in a different manner. We should encourage students to focus on process and place together, rather than merely thinking about which international

border they hope to cross. If our degree programs require students to pick a thematic track, as so often they do, then we should require our students to take the same approach to study abroad. If global studies is truly a different beast from area studies or international relations, then that difference should be reflected in the study abroad programs chosen by our students.

At my college, we are taking three steps to tailor our study abroad requirement to the specific needs of global studies students (while actively seeking input on other possible approaches). First, we are developing our own short-term study abroad courses that explicitly deal with key issues in contemporary globalization. Our first such course focuses on culture, globalization and development in Ghana, with students traveling in May 2010. Our second course examines the tensions between conservation and globalization in Panama, with study and travel planned for Spring 2011. The development of our own courses allows us to embed the learning objectives of our major directly into these study abroad opportunities.

Where internal study abroad courses are not appropriate or sufficient, we have begun working to improve our advising for external study abroad programs. We are developing a guide to study abroad programs that should be of particular interest and benefit to global studies students based on the subject matter and course of study. Study abroad institutions such as the School for International Training (SIT) and the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE) have developed courses that address complex global issues, and we are working to match courses like these to the academic tracks our students choose. We advise students to think about what themes and research topics they are most interested in grappling with while abroad, then look to see which courses provide the closest fit. We do not try to suggest that place is unimportant, of course – we simply want the topics and issues to be given significant weight in the decision-making process.

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Finally, we are working to be more self-reflexive about the study abroad process itself, asking students to recognize that the networks and flows that position them as participants in programs across the globe can themselves be the object of study in our field. A colleague of mine once wrote about what students *don't* learn abroad (Feinberg, 2002), arguing that it is near impossible for students from the Western

world to escape the “imaginary world of globalized, postmodern capitalism” that puts them at the center of the globe, and asking if study abroad programs can provide a sufficient challenge to students’ preconceived notions of how the world works. His argument seems particularly germane for those of us in global studies: how can we justify a study abroad requirement if we don’t actively seek out – or create – those programs that offer such challenges, while in turn providing students with the necessary tools of critical analysis that enable them to question the very act of studying abroad?

We are working to truly integrate the study abroad requirement into our major, rather than simply treat it as a box that students must check on their way to a degree. By teaching students the necessary skills of critical analysis and asking them to apply those skills to their own study abroad experience, by advising students to focus on the themes and content of study abroad programs rather than simply locale, by identifying external study abroad programs that are particularly good fits for our major, and by developing our own internal study abroad courses that explicitly address globalization, we are increasing the likelihood that study abroad both embraces and enhances the learning objectives of our academic major.

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