

Assessing Value and Effectiveness of Study Abroad and Exchange Programmes in Foreign Language Degree Programmes at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus

This research was partially supported by a grant in aid from the UWI Campus Research and Publication Fund. Dr Nicole Roberts and Dr Beverly-Anne Carter, Principal Investigators.

Abstract

As study abroad efforts take on increased importance globally, it is vital that we use the resources of the academy to research the impact and effectiveness of these programmes (Lederman, 2007). For this paper, action research was used to assess all aspects of the varied exchange (EXC) programmes and study abroad (SA) programmes which exist at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine campus. Data was collected from among students in the French and Spanish programmes. While many students lauded the broad intentions of the programmes, it was found that the impact of these international experiences on student learning has not to date been assessed with an aim to making interventions in the varied programmes. The study seeks to assess the academic benefit of the programmes while at the same time assess the value-added aspects of the programmes.

As Vande Berg indicates, to simply send students to a location abroad for academic study is not sufficient toward facilitating the larger goal of creating effective global citizenship. Findings from this research lend empirical support to the notion that study abroad and exchange programmes at all levels facilitate the creation of global citizens. Additionally, it must be noted that it is not enough to send students to study abroad without intentional pedagogy focused on outcomes of intercultural effectiveness.

Keywords: study abroad, exchange programmes, student learning, foreign language competitiveness.

1. Introduction:

While study abroad programmes are increasing globally, at the St. Augustine campus of the University of the West Indies (UWI), participation in study abroad (SA) and exchange (EXC) programmes do not seem to have great enough reach among student stakeholders. This is not because of a lack of programmes nor information. Indeed, as the websites for the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics (DMLL) and the International Office both indicate, there are a number of programmes open to student participation yearly. At the UWI, Study Abroad can take place in a wide range of institutions from among a variety of programmes both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Further, it should be noted that the paper looks at only the undergraduate programming in French and Spanish and covers the years 2003-2013.

At present in the DMLL, French students have access to the following programmes

- Summer Immersion: Contact et Recherche Caraïbe (CO.RE.CA.) A two week programme in Guadeloupe.
- Study Abroad Programme - Université des Antilles et de la Guyane (UAG). A semester long programme in Martinique. (This is now Université des Antilles).
- Study Abroad Programme - Université Michel de Montaigne (Bordeaux III), France. A year long programme in France.
- English Assistantship Programme. An exchange/work abroad programme of one academic year for recent UWI graduates.

Students may also access any of the programmes which come out of UWI partnerships (through The International Office) for a semester-long or a year-long SA programme at any of the following institutions:

- 1) Université de Montréal - Canada
- 2) Institut d'Etudes Politiques of Bordeaux - France

- 3) Institut d'Etudes Politiques of Toulouse - France
- 4) Sports Management School – France

Similarly, Spanish students have access to a number of programmes which include the following:

- Student Assistantship. An exchange programme of one academic year with the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (UPN), Bogotá. Students must have completed two academic years at the UWI and must return to the UWI to complete their degree programme.
- Study abroad programme. Opportunities exist for a semester-long programme in Colombia, Costa Rica, Spain.
- Study abroad programme. Opportunities exist for a year-long programme in Colombia, Costa Rica, Spain.
- Short stay (pasantía corta) six week summer programme with Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá. (Note: This programme was suspended in 2009 due to economic costs.)
- Short stay (pasantía corta) four week summer programme with the Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica.
- Programa de Asistente de Idiomas en Colombia - ICETEX [ICETEX Language Assistantship programme]: An exchange/work abroad programme of one academic year for recent UWI graduates (The MOU is between the UWI and the Instituto Colombiano de Crédito Educativo y Estudios Técnicos en el Exterior/ ICETEX).

In addition, students who are majors of Spanish may access any of the programmes which come out of UWI partnerships (through The International Office) for a semester-long or a year-long SA programme at any of the following institutions:

- 1) Simon Bolivar University - Venezuela
- 2) Universidad de Oriente - Venezuela
- 3) Universidad de la Sabana - Colombia
- 4) University of Zaragoza- Spain

1.1 Problem investigated:

The purpose of this study is to identify the SA and EXC programmes offered at the UWI, St. Augustine. It explores the possible reasons or causes of a seemingly lacklustre participation by students and focuses on the central research question - whether students fail to take advantage of SA and EXC opportunities due solely to personal economic limitations. The study also seeks to assess the overall impact of the international experiences of the students and to determine the academic benefit of the programmes while at the same time describe the value-added aspects (if any) to the degree programmes.

1.2 Research Objective:

Undoubtedly, student participation rates in SA and EXC programmes are of value both to the DMLL as well as to the institution as a whole. However, it is more important to the department that we have a sense (based on empirical evidence) of the levels of student learning throughout SA and EXC programmes. This would allow us a basis by which to measure the internationalisation of our programming as well as have evidence of learning among our language students and perhaps most importantly, be able to gauge the value of SA and EXC programmes to the UWI French and/or Spanish language degree. Broadly, the goal of the study is a comprehensive overview and an assessment of the SA and EXC programmes offered to date in the DMLL.

More specifically, the study will collect data on programmes and student participation in the various programmes (Period: 2003-2013). It seeks to ascertain the international experience that students gain and it compares the way/s in which students benefit from participation in programmes. The paper ends by determining if/how participation adds value to the DMLL French / Spanish degree programme

2. Literature Review:

Although SA programmes see students receiving credits for the work and study carried out abroad, EXC programmes provide students with work abroad experience for which they do not receive university credits. However, despite these differing programme models, student participation in both programmes take place in the DMLL French and Spanish degree programmes.

One definite limitation to writing this paper was the lack of substantive studies on the topic. There are numerous studies on SA and EXC programmes across the U.S. and throughout Europe where programmes such as the Erasmus programme (European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) have existed since the 1980s (this programmes is now called Erasmus Plus / Erasmus+). Programmes such as these which are oriented toward globalising education see the exchange of thousands of students annually.

However, in the context of the Anglophone Caribbean there has not been a study of this nature. Indeed to date, no research of any type has been carried out on SA and EXC programmes at the UWI, St. Augustine although SA and EXC programmes have been in operation since the 1990s. Moreover, a central issue which must be taken into account is that across the Caribbean there are varied university systems. For example, students in a U.S. university system (located in the Caribbean) are nevertheless able to access SA programmes globally. At the UWI, there are a number of students in programmes, for example, students at the Arthur Lok Jack Graduate School of Business, who have access to and are encouraged to take part in short programmes such as the International Business Study Trip, a two week exploration which sets out tours of the country to be visited, cultural experiences, business meetings, tours of business facilities, business courses, workshops or strategic sessions and of course social interaction with natives. Trips of this nature can amount to prices in the range of TT\$25,000.00 but students are encouraged to plan for the trip and thus to set up payment schedules. However it must be noted that such programmes are not included in this research study.

The Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics is deeply committed to the notion that SA and EXC programmes are important to the academic and cultural development of our undergraduate student majors of French and Spanish. Among the numerous studies by U.S scholars, Vande Berg (2007) indicates that to simply send students to a location abroad for academic study is not sufficient toward facilitating the larger goal of creating effective global

citizenship. We feel that these programmes not only facilitate student intellectual growth but also contribute to the internationalisation of the DMLL. Undoubtedly one form of student assessment which contributes to our understanding of what students have learnt/gained from their study abroad experience is the blog. Blogs such as *Garvin's World: A Blog by Garvin Tafari Parsons* (<http://garvinsworld.blogspot.com/>) go a long way in helping us to determine the impact of SA and EXC programmes on student participants.

3. Data Collection:

In terms of the collection of data, the first stage of the process focused on collecting the names of as many students as possible who participated in Foreign Language SA and EXC Programmes during or after their studies at The UWI, between 2003 and 2013. E-mails were sent to Heads of Departments, Study Abroad Coordinators, Programme Coordinators and Lecturers. Also, names were extracted from memoranda, and other files in the DMLL Main office. By the end of this stage, 218 names were acquired. The breakdown of this figure is as follows:

- 127 persons participated in Study Abroad/ Foreign Exchange Programmes under the French degree programme; 111 were female and 16 were male.
- 91 persons participated in Study Abroad/Foreign Exchange Programmes under the Spanish degree programme; 76 were female and 15 were male.

A second stage of the process then began which involved obtaining the contact information of the 218 persons, as most of the names did not have this information attached or readily available. Using the names as a guide, the Research Assistant searched Facebook, perused the lists of incoming PG and graduating students with degrees in Spanish, French and/or Latin American

Studies, and sought information from lecturers or others. The number was further reduced from 218 to 149, of which:

- 92 persons participated in Study Abroad/ Foreign Exchange Programmes under the French degree programme; 78 were female and 14 were male.
- 57 persons participated in Study Abroad/Foreign Exchange Programmes under the Spanish degree programme; 48 were female and 9 were male.

In a third stage, messages were sent to the 149 persons. 117 messages were delivered via Facebook, while 32 emails were sent. Persons were asked to:

- Verify or provide their email address
- Name the Study Abroad/ Foreign Exchange Programme/s they participated in as well as the year of participation
- State their major
- Give their year of graduation

The final stage was placing all persons who responded to the messages and emails on the database of survey candidates. Two databases were created- one for each degree programme- and names were divided according to gender. Each database was further divided according to the specific Study Abroad/ Foreign Exchange Programme, with the participants being listed chronologically. Of the 149 persons who received messages, 104 responded. These responses are the ones used in the completion of this report. They were as follow:

- 56 persons participated in Study Abroad/ Foreign Exchange Programmes under the French degree programme; 46 were female and 10 were male.
- 48 persons participated in Study Abroad/ Foreign Exchange Programmes under the Spanish degree programme; 38 were female and 10 were female.

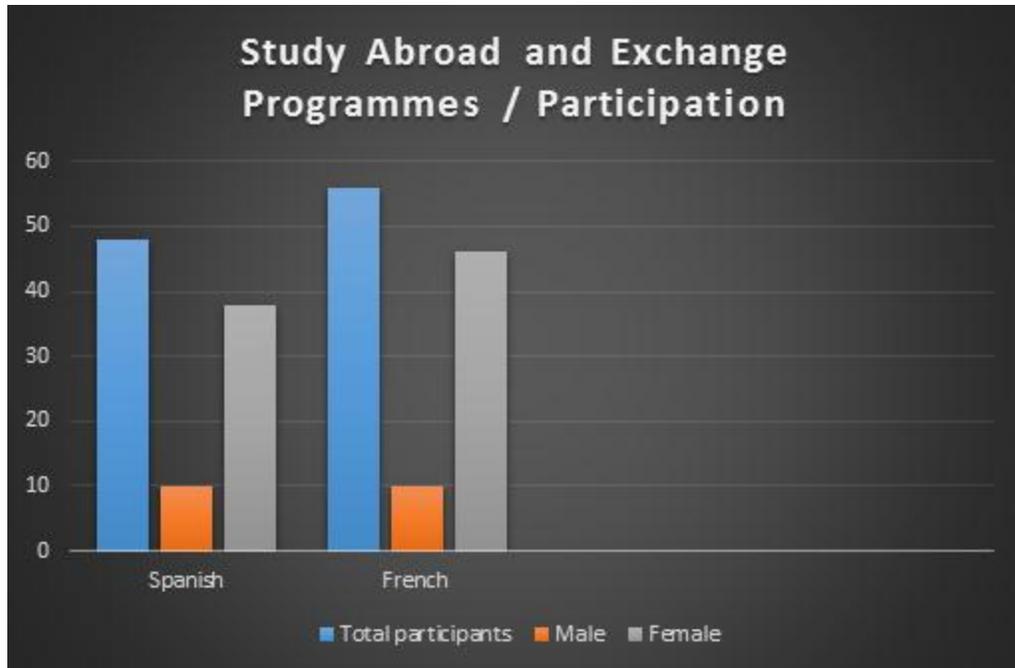


Figure 1 Study Abroad and Exchange Programmes: Participation

A further breakdown of figures according to the specific Study Abroad/ Foreign Exchange Programme is as follows:

French Study Abroad/ Foreign Exchange Programmes:

- **Study Abroad, Bordeaux 3:** 13 persons; 10 females, 3 males
- **English Language Assistantship Programme:** 38 persons; 33 females, 5 males
- **Immersion Programme, Guadeloupe:** 18 persons; 14 females, 4 males
- **Study Abroad, Université de Montréal:** 1 male

- **Study Abroad, Université des Antilles et de la Guyane (UAG): 1 male**
- **Visiting Lecturer, Bordeaux 3: 1 female**
- **Teacher Training Programme, Guadeloupe: 1 female**

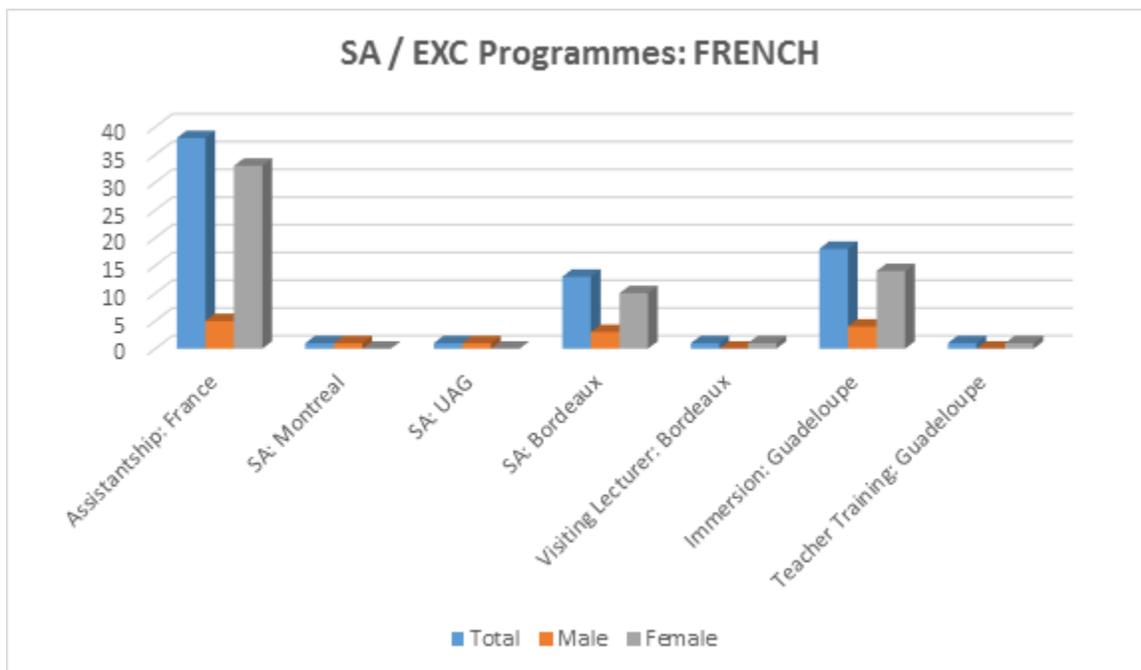


Figure 2 Study Abroad and Exchange Programmes in French

Spanish Study Abroad/ Foreign Exchange Programmes:

- **Immersion Programme, Universidad Nacional, Bogotá: 21 persons; 17 females, 4 males**

- **Immersion Programme, Universidad Javeriana, Cali:** 8 persons; 6 females, 2 males
- **Exchange Programme, UPN/UWI:** 14 persons; 11 females, 3 males
- **ICETEX Work Abroad Programme:** 13 persons; 9 females, 4 males
- **Study Abroad, University of Zaragoza, Spain:** 1 female
- **Independent Study/ Work Abroad Ventures:** 4 female

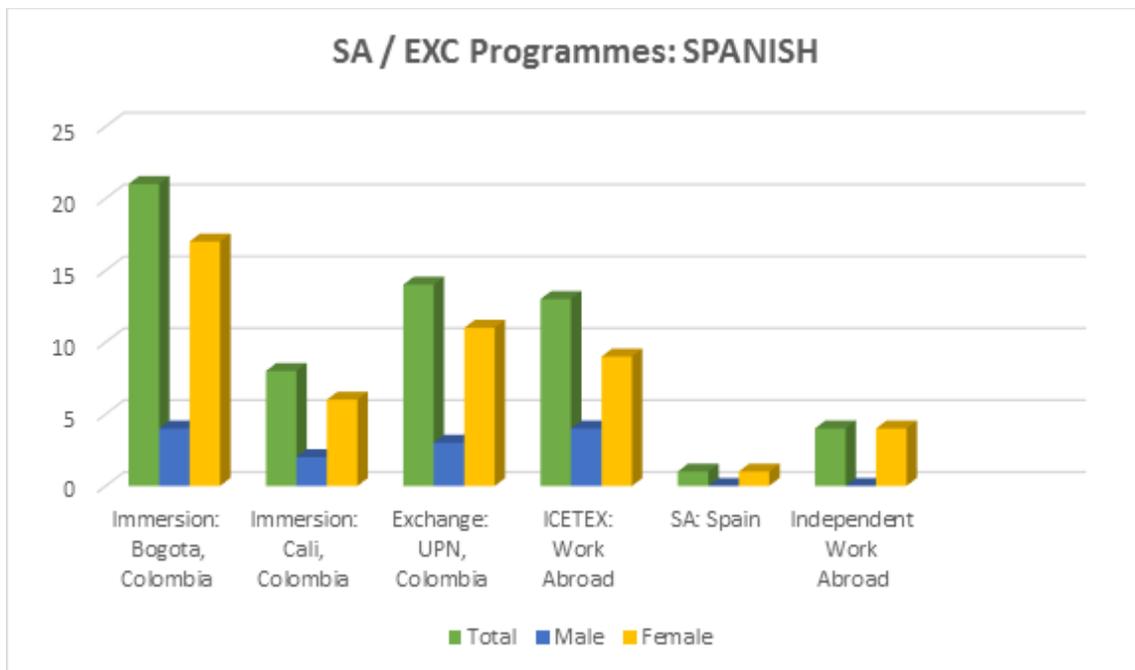


Figure 3 Study Abroad and Exchange Programmes in Spanish

Among the total of 104 candidates, 98 surveys which employed thirteen questions, were administered electronically since 6 of the 104 survey candidates had participated in more than

one programme. Candidates were not given a required response time, however, periodic reminders were sent out and after a four month period, 65 survey responses were collected which were complete and the data was then collated and analysed. The return of surveys was voluntary however, the written comments returned contained both positive as well as negative comments by students who were both pleased as well as displeased by aspects of the programmes. From this we can conclude that the sample was fairly unbiased.

Of the five open-ended questions in the survey instrument, candidates were asked to describe their study abroad experience, to indicate whether the programme was of benefit to them and why, to discuss the benefits or disadvantages of the orientation session prior to departure, to assess their return to UWI, to indicate if there was a follow up “work abroad” experience after graduation and/or indicate if their present job makes use of the language studied. .

Finally, a control group of five students (n = 5) who chose to not participate in any study abroad or exchange programme was chosen and interviewed. The focus group of 5 students who did not participate in any programmes (3 female 2 male) met in a short one hour session and responded to 5 open ended questions regarding their choice to not participate in any SA or EXC programme. Their responses were similar to each other in that all cited financial reasonings as the main drawback to their lack of participation in any programmes. Overall, they concluded that they:

- found it attractive in the orientation session
- felt that they needed to complete the degree in as short a time as possible (3 years) and get a job
- felt they did not have money to spend on such programmes.
- indicated that they felt that they were unable to save monies despite the fact of knowing about the SA / EXC programmes from the start of the degree programme
- suggested a study abroad information session with more information given to students and more advice provided on how to save for participation in SA/EXC programmes
- felt that they would seek to apply (n = 2 / both female) for the Language Assistantship programme offered to graduating students after graduation because 1) they had heard very good things about it from returnees and 2) it is a paid position in a foreign location

4. Discussion and Analysis

To participate in SA and EXC programmes, students of the UWI, St. Augustine are required to have a minimum GPA of 3.00 (or a B average). The results offer varying degrees of support of both SA and EXC programmes in French and Spanish however, there is seemingly more of an expectation of SA and EXC programmes among the French majors. Overall in the DMLL, it is felt that there is more of a culture of study abroad among French students. Although more anecdotal than empirical evidence exists, French students seem to have more of an expectation of study abroad and/or participation in exchange programmes and openly discuss plans and experiences abroad when compared with students who are majors of Spanish.

In the survey, various respondents indicated benefits to speaking French in the classroom with more confidence on return to the UWI as well as greater success in Listening comprehension. However, overall, Spanish students also associated their SA and EXC experiences with intellectual growth. As student x points out: “This (programme) was definitely a benefit - It

helped me to improve Spanish language fluency and develop practical use of the language. Also the experience of living in a new country contributed to my personal growth - enhanced my ability to deal with new and challenging situations, made me more open to different cultures.” As with this student, many others linked improved academic performance with greater intercultural awareness.

Most students felt that there were more benefits to the programmes than bad experiences.

The programme was a definite benefit. It allowed me to gain invaluable experience in teaching English as a foreign language, as well as increasing my fluency in Spanish. It gave me an advantage in my final year of undergraduate study as well.

Student A

In the main, student negative experiences centred on EXC programmes not having an academic slant. Students felt that this could be improved by awarding co-curricular credit for work carried out in such programmes. Students also felt that although they were provided with an excellent orientation session prior to departure, what is needed are tailed courses on teaching english and/or cultural awareness especially for the EXC students who go abroad to teach English.

Finally, the overall majority of students indicated improvement as a direct result of SA and EXC programmes. Perhaps most importantly, various students felt that the SA and eXC programmes

provided them with an opportunity academic, personal, and intercultural development. as one student pointed out:

The Exchange programme was a huge benefit - The programme teaches individuals the value of learning a foreign language through sharing one's own language/culture with a foreign audience. Furthermore, there is no better way to learn/improve one's competence in foreign languages than to actually live in a foreign country and experience the culture and people associated with them.

Student L

Or as Garvin Parsons pointed out in his blog entry "Riot" of Tuesday 1st March 2011:

Well, apparently I had to come to Colombia to feel the burning sensations that only smelling tear gas can give...

Before leaving for Bogota, the other assistants and I were told that La Pedagogica is known for student riots. The reasoning behind these riots is the fact that the students feel that the government doesn't spend enough money on public education which is, well, true seeing that there is little or no technology at this University (oh boy, I miss UWI).

There were areas that this study did not explore due to limited funding and resources. For example, there are more French than Spanish participants in SA and EXC programmes. This situation should be further investigated as the Spanish section intake is approx. 150% higher than that of French. However to complete this, students would have to be surveyed to investigate why they were more apt to choose French programmes or indeed explore other possible influences on their SA and EXC choices.

Additionally, the study did not explore a comparison between the numbers in the programmes in French and Spanish vs the numbers who take part in SA and EXC programmes. This information would be important to gain insight into the overall impact of SA and EXC programmes on graduating classes as a whole.

Clearly, more funding would be needed to collect data which can play a great role in marketing our DMLL SA and EXC programmes. The latter is needed as the DMLL and the UWI continue to register lower enrollment rates in language programmes. But there is also a need for greater collaboration between the International office and members of staff in the DMLL so as to intensify recruiting efforts.

5. Conclusions

It is clear that participation in SA and EXC programmes is not growing among students in the DMLL. Despite the first orientation meeting which takes place at the start of semester one, at which students are advised to consider and plan for participation in SA and/or EXC programmes, despite information which is filtered to the student population through social media and through the International office, and despite the fact that Trinidadian and Tobagonian students access GATE funding which covers tuition, many students still claim a lack of funding as the major barrier toward their participation in programmes. By analysing students who have participated in SA and EXC programmes at the UWI, St. Augustine campus, over a ten year period, the current study hopes to provide support for the argument that the institution must view

positively student participation in these programmes and be prepared to explore varied funding measures whether the regional institution or through the varied governments which support the UWI. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this paper presented the problems but more importantly highlighted the possibilities for student learning abroad and presented the student view that SA and EXC programmes are an educational exercise with innumerable benefits.

6. Bibliography

- Elola, I., & Oskoz, A. (2008). Blogging: Fostering intercultural competence development in foreign language. *Foreign Language Annals*, 41(3), 389-576.
- Kehl, K., & Morris, J. (2007). Differences in global-mindedness between short-term and semester-long study abroad participants at selected private universities. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 15, 67-79.
- Olson, C. L., & Kroeger, K. R. (2001). Global competency and intercultural sensitivity. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 5(2), 116-137. Available online at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/102831530152003>. Accessed:
- Rexeisen, R., & Al-Khatib, J. (2009). Assurance of Learning and Study Abroad: A Case Study. *Journal of Teaching in International Business*, 20(3), 192-207. Available online at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08975930903099077>. Accessed:
- Vande Berg, M. Intervening in the learning of U.S. students abroad. (2007). In *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11, 3 & 4, Fall/Winter, 392-99