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# The Impact of Long-Term Travel on the Socio-Political Consciousness of South Carolina Students

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## ABSTRACT

This pilot study's driving force is to contribute to the student travel and study abroad literature and provide insight for social workers interested in practice on the global level. Social Work practice strongly emphasizes the importance of continuing education. On the macro level, advocacy and knowledge of policy can inform actions taken in the field. Literature surrounding study abroad among students typically focuses on cultural and educational impact, with little broad research focus on how study abroad experiences impact global awareness. The United Nations created a list of goals, known as the Sustainable Development Goals, aimed towards the rectification of pressing issues around the globe by the year 2030. The Sustainable Development Goals cover a broad range of targets, with its first being the lofty task of eradicating poverty, while others focus on the protection of biodiversity in forests and oceans. A common theme found in information surrounding the goals is how vital the spread of information is, whether it be at the local or political level. Before an acceptable level of sustainability is reached, citizens and governments must be aware of it. Some of the Sustainable Development Goals were used to create a new framework for gauging the effect travel has on knowledge of global issues. Data was collected from college-level students around South Carolina via an online survey. Questions within the survey were sorted into the scales named after the three overarching targets of the Sustainable Development Goals: ending poverty, ensuring prosperity for all, and protecting the planet. Results found that though most students who traveled had strong opinions about world issues, demographics and field of study were more likely to predict differences in opinion.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This report will review the literature surrounding study abroad, its impact on students, how the duration of trips influence completion of program-related goals, and where the available literature on study abroad falls short of offering a comprehensive overview of the subject.

### Overview of Study Abroad and its Parameters

Studying abroad is a popular practice among higher education institutions around the world. On a study abroad trip, students are sent to study at high schools or universities in a foreign country. American universities offer a variety of options for study abroad, but they are typically separated by length. Short-term study abroad can mean faculty-led trips lasting a few weeks or even up to a month, or a study abroad trip limited to one summer. Semester programs can be half of an academic year, or an entire

academic year. With an increasing interest in globalization sending American students abroad, universities and scholarship databases have streamlined ways to access funding. There are several scholarships available to cover the costs for students from all backgrounds--for example, the Benjamin A. Gilman award for Pell Grant recipients, and the Fullbright, for anyone that qualifies--to choose from. Some universities have partnerships with foreign institutions that allow students to use their financial aid reward to cover their tuition at their host schools (Study.com).

Because costs are consistently an issue for most students even with financial aid, short-term study abroad trips have become more popular among American students. By the academic year of 2001-2002, the popularity of short-term programs rose from 38% (Chieffo, Griffiths, 2004) to 49% of all programs (Dwyer, 2004). In the 2009-2010 academic school year,

57% of American students studying abroad were participating in short-term programs. Engle and Engle (2004) report that most short-term study abroad programs are structured in a way that provides comfort for American students, decreasing the likelihood of changes in behavior and attitudes. Ingram and Peterson (2004) found that longer stays tended to generate stronger positive results; but Dwyer (2004), Engle, and Engle (2004) have both found that short-term programs with well-defined academic and cultural goals beget results that are just as positive as long-term study abroad trips. Engle and Engle's study was unique in that it introduced a language component and was focused on a cohort of students in a single program who were required to speak intermediate French in their stay. This study bookends the importance of short-term programs with clearly defined goals as opposed to short-term programs meant for leisure.

#### **Localized Studies**

Much of the literature about study abroad's impact is school or program specific. Chieffo and Griffith's study (2004) is limited to University of Delaware students who studied abroad from the years 2003-2004. The Engles' study was confined to students in the AUCP program with at least an intermediate grasp on the French language (2004). One study (Bell, et al.) was confined to three nations in the South Pacific ocean—Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji—and followed a cohort of just 150 students. Each student in Bell's study was given four open-ended questions to answer: 1) 'What did you learn about the country that you visited?' (2) 'What did you learn about yourself as an American?' (3) 'How have your perspectives on the world changed?' and (4) 'Please take the opportunity to add anything further.' Their responses, while valuable, are difficult to objectively quantify. The students reported a better understanding of environmental issues, as the three host-nations are heavily reliant on tourism and agriculture and thus more willing to care for their environment (2016). While research that is specific to schools and programs is valuable and can be generalized to larger populations, variations in region and program

design make it difficult to completely extrapolate data earned from them.

#### **Impact on Personal Growth**

Though the literature surrounding study abroad showcases benefits for trips of all durations, long-term study abroad tends to be more positive, even in relation to short-term trips with clear structures. Dwyer (2004) found that full-year students were twice as likely to cultivate long-lasting friendships with citizens from their host countries, and were more willing to learn different languages. Ingraham and Peterson (2004) reported that study abroad students felt increases in maturity and self-confidence, and a willingness to consider the world from a more open perspective. Study abroad students were reported to feel more patience towards those who spoke English as a second language, and had a growing interest in critically analyzing their own politics (Dwyer 2004).

#### **Impact on Global Awareness**

Research suggests that studying abroad can have a significant impact on raising the global consciousness of students. Bell's study, for example, had students visiting countries with different sources of economic security than the United States. These nations placed heavy emphasis on environmental protections and recycling, which many of the students remarked on in their answers (2014). One student remarked that "[Americans] do not place enough importance on reducing the United States' ecological footprint; Americans are not conscious enough of the consequences of wasteful lifestyles" (2014), echoing the sentiment of many in their cohort. Much of the recent literature surrounding study abroad focuses on region-specific issues[SD1], and is more likely to provide data on specific global issues. There exists, however, a gap in the literature concerning a wide breadth of issues impacting the United States and the world.

#### **United Nations Development Goals**

This study aims to categorize a list of issues outlined by the United Nations and to use a theoretical framework to quantify the socio-political consciousness of South Carolina college students. The United Nation's seventeen Sustainable Development Goals are focused on three key issues—poverty, protection of the

planet, and ensuring the prosperity of all citizens. The seventeen goals range from poverty to healthcare, to infrastructure and environment-friendly actions, to social justice in a number of categories. The Sustainable Development Goals described below were used in the creation of a new framework for gauging the effect travel has on knowledge of global issues. Goal nine, which focuses on infrastructure; goal sixteen, which focuses on peace resolution; and goal seventeen, which focuses on partnerships for the achievement of the goals, were not included in the creation of the framework.

### **Poverty**

Under poverty, the United Nations lists goals one and two: ending poverty and ending world hunger, respectively. Extreme poverty exists in the United States and around the world, especially in areas with more developing countries like Sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia. Social protection programs provide the most crucial support for these issues, which is key for the disabled, who are disproportionately at risk of suffering from poverty and starvation. The United Nations hopes to introduce sustainable food systems and maintain the genetic diversity of agriculture in the area (Sustainable Development Goals).

### **Prosperity of All Citizens**

Under healthcare, the United Nations lists goals three, four, five, seven, eight, ten, and eleven. These goals are good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, creating affordable and clean energy, fostering decent work and economic growth, and creating sustainable cities and communities. Children are consistently vulnerable groups, as well as young mothers. Infectious diseases are rampant in poor areas, which are disproportionately filled with young women and their children. Health systems require funding to educate new generations of doctors and serve a growing population in developing countries. Inequalities exist in all walks of life in the United States and abroad, and cover issues ranging from education to housing to the workplaces. These inequalities are typically race, class, and gender. The United Nations hopes to urge nations to work towards closing these disparities.

### **Protection of the Planet**

Under protection of the planet, the United Nations lists goals six, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen. These issues are clean water and sanitation, responsible consumption and production, climate action, protection of life below water, and protection of life on land. Developed nations around the world are consistently creating waste and pollution. Agricultural programs and corporations waste food that could be readily distributed or composted, and sea life is at danger of many of wastes aside from food. The United Nations hopes to introduce more sustainable habits in developed countries and distribute aid to underdeveloped countries impacted by these issues.

### **Connection to Study Abroad and Social Work Practice**

These goals listed by the United Nations are important because the level with which they impact different nations varies. Students who study abroad or travel to different nations around the world will be exposed to different versions of each of these issues. For Social Work students and licensed social workers, it is important to factor in environmental issues that cross borders and impact the lives of clients. The goal of this study is to see if there is a possible way to objectively quantify how experience in foreign countries impacts the consciousness of students who may have been exposed to them.

### **METHODS**

The purpose of this study is to use a new framework to gauge how study or travel abroad impacts students' attitudes on a variety of issues impacting both the United States and the world. There are many published studies surrounding how study abroad impacts the personal growth of students and their thoughts on environmentalism, but there has not been a framework that gauges their thoughts on a wide range of global issues. This pilot study used the United Nations' seventeen Sustainable Development Goals as a framework to quantify information about student attitudes. The data was collected via a quantitative Qualtrics survey. The survey, titled "Attitudes on Sustainable Development," was distributed in a variety of

ways. It was shared on social media, it was distributed to Winthrop University students via an email announcement system, and the survey was sent to eleven study abroad coordinators from universities around South Carolina. Because this is a small-scale pilot study, the participant pool was restricted to South Carolina college students aged eighteen and up. Once collected, data was stored in a password protected USB drive and a password protected storage service online. It was analyzed using the SPSS statistics analysis software. Through analysis and SPSS, three scales were created: the poverty scale, the earth scale, and the ensuring prosperity scale. In quantitative scales ranging from one to four, where one was strongly disagree and four was strongly agree, attitudes on questions within these scales were used to determine significance among groups.

#### Structure of the Survey

The survey, based on the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, was broken up into four parts: Study Abroad, Global Issues, Sustainable Development, and Demographics. In total, the survey had forty-seven items. Part one asked students about their travel experiences. If participants had not traveled, they were forwarded to part two of the survey. Participants who had travel experience were asked about location, timing, and reasons for their stay. Part two asked students questions about their thoughts on issues at the community scale and the global scale. The purpose of asking participants their thoughts on issues in the United States and abroad was to gauge if there was any difference in relevance to individuals, especially in relation to experience with travel. Part three asked students their thoughts on environmental and human rights issues. Like part two, the issues in this section impact both the United States and other nations. However, participants were not asked to compare impact on scales, because responses to this would be used to bolster comparisons between groups. Finally, part four asked participants to share information about their demographics. Demographics were used to categorize data based on different variables in this section--age group, gender identity, race or ethnicity, and

major. These were compared for data analysis and visualization of data.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

For this pilot study, three research questions were created:

- 1.) Does study or travel abroad impact the socio-political consciousness of South Carolina students?
- 2.) Will the responses of students vary across demographics?
- 3.) Will the responses of students vary across majors and disciplines?

Research affirmed the impact of study abroad and showed variability in responses based on demographics and major. There were fifty-seven participants in total, and thirty-nine surveys were completed. Completed surveys were used to create the figures shown below.

Of this sample, women felt more strongly about poverty and ensuring prosperity than men (Figure 3). There was a positive correlation between the number of times traveled outside of the United States and importance of being aware of gender inequality:  $r = .355, p < .05$ . There was a negative correlation between age and the impact of war:  $r = -.334, p < .05$ . There was a negative correlation between age and the impact of racism:  $r = -.428, p < .01$ . Younger participants (ages 18-24) were more likely to have increased awareness of the impact of poverty, war, and racism.

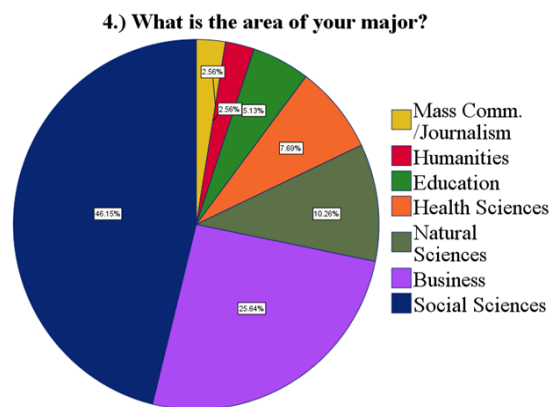


Figure 1: Breakdown of participants' areas of study.

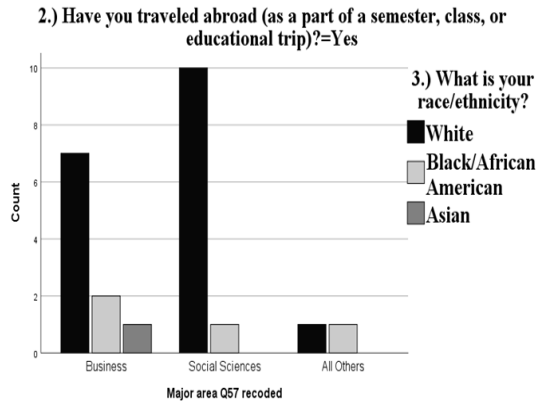


Figure 2: Comparison of participants' race and area of study with international travel

Group Statistics					
2.) What is your gender?		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Poverty Scale Average	Male	4	3.5500	.59722	.29861
	Female	33	4.0364	.45402	.07904
Earth Scale Average	Male	4	4.2143	.24744	.12372
	Female	33	4.2078	.31154	.05423
Ensuring Prosperity Scale Average	Male	4	3.9500	.12910	.06455
	Female	33	4.4091	.40494	.07049

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
		F	Sig.				
I learned about global issues while studying/traveling abroad.	Equal variances assumed	3.788	.062	2.118	28	.043	.917
	Equal variances not assumed			1.573	5.953	.167	.917
I have learned about sustainable development while studying/traveling abroad	Equal variances assumed	.367	.550	2.877	26	.008	1.626
	Equal variances not assumed			2.979	6.099	.024	1.626

Figure 3: Participants' responses to questions concerning knowledge of world issues and sustainable development while abroad. Most respondents' answers were approaching significance.

It is important to note that the bulk of respondents were women, white, and majoring in the areas of social sciences. Of this sample, white participants were more likely to have studied abroad, but this may be the result of the skew towards white participants in the overall pool of respondents. All participants who completed this survey lingered in the "agree" area of each scale, and though students who had travelled held more extreme opinions, there were no significant differences between students who had and had not traveled. Because most people who responded to these surveys are studying either

Business or the Social Sciences, it is possible that the education that they have been receiving influenced their opinions. These fields have been increasingly stressing the importance of globalization in the past few years as social media and communication between networks becomes more sophisticated. Similarly, these two disciplines tended to echo each other in responses to different survey questions. Further research must explore, within a wider group, the intersectionality of race, gender, and major on attitudes towards the issues in this survey.

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