Trends in the Internationalization of Higher Education
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A couple of years ago, the College of Education invited me to speak about the state of research in the field of education abroad. I titled my talk “study abroad changed my life, yes, but how?” and focused on the need to design studies that measure the impact of particular program designs. In many ways, my talk echoed the theme of this year’s conference of the Forum on Education Abroad: Moving beyond “it was great”. I reviewed the major studies in our field, from Lilli Engle’s program typology, to the Georgetown study led by Mick Vande Berg, an illustrious predecessor to my own position here at MSU, including Minnesota’s SAGE project and Georgia’s GLOSSARI. And of course, I highlighted MSU’s own institutional analysis published by Ingraham and Peterson that showed that, compared to the general undergraduate population, those who study abroad have higher retention rates, shorter time to completion, and a higher CGPA.

Following that, I called for more research on ed abroad programming at MSU. With over 300 programs directly administered by MSU on all continents, perhaps the country’s largest group of engaged faculty leaders, and leading the nation for study abroad participation among public universities for the last eight years, MSU offers a rich petri dish to examine program objectives, learning outcomes, and the impact of program variables.

The brown bag drew a small group of faculty and doctoral students. John Dirkx was the discussant. Having only recently arrived at MSU, my only interaction with Professor Dirkx previously was a difficult meeting where he and his chair explained how the administrative systems of my office were neither conducive nor supportive to his purposes on taking a group of graduate students to the U.K. That meeting led me to initiate a review of our graduate education abroad programs that essentially agreed with John’s position. This administrative report was working its way up the chain but I had no solution yet at the time of this talk. As you can imagine, I was a little leery to see him as the discussant! Those of you who know Professor Dirkx and his gracious generosity would have told me not to worry. I’ll never forget his opening remarks in response to my talk. “Thank you for those interesting remarks, Brett. Everything you’ve said for the past half hour relates to the impact of these international experiences on the ‘emerging adult’. I am interested primarily in adult learners and the average age of the students I serve is 34.” And so began a fascinating collaboration with Professor Dirkx, Dr. Kristin Janka-Miller, a team of MSU doctoral students, my peers within the Big 10, and Jim Buschman at New York University.

I’d like to focus for a moment on John’s statement. Our rhetoric at MSU and indeed nationally does situate the institutional goals of study abroad as a tool to leverage the power of an international learning experience and use it almost as an incubator or accelerator of the student development process. Over the last three decades, study abroad has moved from what I experienced as a young man fresh off the farm taking my first trip overseas to spend an academic year in Paris, what I call the ‘throw them off the boat and come back and get them in a year’ approach to growth via cultural immersion, to more and more highly engineered programs of shorter duration. MSU was leading in this direction already in the 1980s. Our peers, particularly large public institutions, soon followed. The vast majority of the enrollment growth in education abroad has come through short-term programs that allow students to enter into an intense experience, usually with the strong guidance of a dedicated program leader from their home institution walking them through a series of planned events which aim to cause cognitive dissonance, that moment when we are ripe for learning, for questioning our usual norms, our habitual ways of doing things, of processing the world around us. Through planned interactions with the natives and structured reflection on the phenomena observed during the day, program leaders aim to support participants through a learning curve at a much faster pace than what I and my generation experienced in the 1980s, where you were left to sink or swim on your own.

What was your experience? When did you ‘get the bug’ and what made you decide you wanted to offer such a learning experience to your students? I can think of many more relaxing ways for an academic to spend the summer than to be responsible for a group of U.S. students 24/7 in a foreign land!

Some of the research in our field posits that structured on-site facilitation is the most powerful predictor of growth in intercultural competence during an education abroad program. My predecessor, Mick
Vande Berg, is one of the most forceful evangelists of what I call the ‘interventionist school’. But the body of work in our field is almost exclusively focused, as John said, on the ‘emerging adult’. For the past 20 years, MSU has had six official goals for education abroad:

1. Facilitate students’ intellectual growth
2. Contribute to students’ professional development
3. Accelerate students’ personal growth
4. Develop students’ skills for relating to culturally different others
5. Enhance students’ self-awareness and understanding of their own culture
6. Contribute to the internationalization of the student’s home department, college, or university.

We undertook a major revision recently of how we present these goals to program leaders. We have incorporated MSU’s liberal learning goals and global competencies along with the standards for good practice developed by the Forum on Education Abroad and offer multiple examples for program leaders to consider as they design their program abroad.

The six official goals for education abroad might be articulated differently at other institutions but the concept of global citizenship has become predominant in the mission statement of the majority of U.S. institutions. Here at MSU, the liberal learning goals and global competencies were developed not just for the 1 out of 4 students who is choosing to undertake an educational experience abroad, they are our institutional goals for all undergraduate students. Our assessment plan using the Beliefs, Events and Values Inventory (BEVI), is trying to measure all students’ progress towards these goals, not just those who sign up for one of the wonderfully intense highly designed ed abroad programs we offer. And this is the key trend I want to identify in my remarks today - the goals of study abroad are moving into the mainstream institutional goals for all students.

Last week, along with Professor Dirkx and others from MSU, I attended the annual conference of the Association of International Education Administrators. This is primarily the admin side of the house and as John says, “there were a lot of suits”. We were celebrating the release of the SAGE handbook of international higher education, a major undertaking by this association and perhaps the most comprehensive guidebook for internationalization available today. (I buy into the shameless hype as I am co-author of the chapter on Cross-Border Delivery.) As you would expect, the volume begins by offering frameworks to define internationalization. Our own John Hudzik’s work on ‘comprehensive internationalization’ figures prominently. At our conference last week, Hans de Wit, one of the few professors of international education, invited us to rethink the concept of internationalization. Recent articles have claimed that internationalization is dead. This one-upmanship of the academic duel sometimes reminds me of the fashion magazines at the checkout counter declaring that 40 is the new 30, or closer to home for me, 50 is the new 40. But as the MSU audience has had ample opportunity to hear Dr. Hudzik’s views on the subject, I’d like to highlight some of Jane Knight’s writing. Internationalization is no longer a concept that applies only to the small portion of students willing and able to pay for an overseas learning experience, it is “the integration of international, global, intercultural, and comparative perspectives into the teaching/learning process and program content.” Knight guides her readers to see it as an ization or a process and not an ism or an ideology. I believe this distinction is useful for the discussions Professor Dirkx has planned for us today.

If the ideology, the ism, of international is moving to the mainstream for undergraduate education, indeed has moved to the mainstream at MSU, what does this mean for graduate education abroad efforts?

At MSU, over the past five years, we have seen the number of graduate ed abroad programs formally working through our central bureaucracy multiplied by five and the number of participants doubled. The majority of this growth is coming from the professional schools, which in some instances may take a more pragmatic approach to the learning goals for their programs. They may be supportive of the overarching rhetoric of global citizenship, but their primary purpose for taking graduate students to a particular location may be more directly related to the scientific phenomena occurring there. The MBA program, for example, may wish to focus primarily on the market conditions of a particular region, while the role of culture in the management systems designed by the companies visited may be secondary. Similarly, our Institute of International Health, headed by Professor Reza Nassiri, takes students to locations where they can see medical conditions not often encountered in the developed world. The role of culture in how healthcare systems address health needs is an important focus as well but the mix or weighting of these goals can be substantially different from a program that aims to accelerate students’ development into global citizenship. A graduate program director may, depending on the background of the participants, take that baseline as a given.
MSU’s College of Education recently set an innovative strategy that all doctoral students should participate in a three-week comparative education program to help students understand the workings of education systems in another country. The initial study of the GLEO project has done pre and post-program interviews with participants and program leaders as well as administered pre- and post-tests of intercultural development. Some results from this work will be shared later in the day. With a top-down strategy launched by former Dean Carol Ames, a common program design was developed. But the range of objectives and goals observed reflects the rich variety of perspective the program leaders bring to the task.

If internationalization is a process increasingly prevalent in all of our undergraduate programs, including for those who do not study abroad as an undergraduate, what does this mean for faculty designing graduate learning experiences overseas? It calls for more clarity and intentionality on the intended outcomes of the experience. Some of the most interesting recent work on study abroad early in the undergraduate experience observes significant gains in cultural capital among students from a low social economic status background and first-generation college goers. Ian McKeown’s dissertation and 2009 book reports data that shows the high impact of early study abroad for this population, allowing them essentially to pull up level with their peers who arrived at university with higher cultural capital.

In graduate education abroad, should we consider that the goals of global citizenship were addressed during the participants’ undergraduate studies and/or during their previous work experience or should we position programs for the equalizer effect they can have? Does this encourage program leaders to focus more squarely on the scientific or sociological phenomena that can be observed in-situ or should they also design intercultural interactions and processing with the same intensity that we observe among undergraduate programs abroad? The answer is for each program leader to decide. For areas where a cross-program strategy is developed, such as in our college of education, clarity on this mix can enhance the potential impact of the programming efforts at a systemic level.

What does this mean for the less-guided design of experiences where dissertation supervisors send graduate students alone into the field overseas to collect data? This practice is perhaps more akin to the study abroad experience of those of us who went overseas as undergrads in the 70s or 80s- the ‘throw them in at the deep end’ approach.

In both cases, whether faculty-led group programs or individual initiative, reflecting on how the goals of internationalization are moving into the mainstream of undergraduate education can help clarify the learning goals for faculty and students.

Thank you.