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# The Experience of Studying Abroad and Creation of a “How to Study Abroad Guide”

Allison Baldwin

*The College at Brockport*, [allison.baldwin1@gmail.com](mailto:allison.baldwin1@gmail.com)

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Running head: STUDY ABROAD MANUAL

Graduating with Honors:  
The Experience of Studying Abroad and Creation of a “How to Study Abroad Guide”

A Senior Honors Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for graduation in the College Honors Program

By  
Allison Baldwin  
Communication & Sport Management Major  
International Studies Minor

The College at Brockport  
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Thesis Director: Dr. Joe Chesebro, Associate Professor, Communication

*Educational use of this paper is permitted for the purpose of providing future students a model example of an Honors senior thesis project.*

### **Abstract**

This paper is a general guide for students who wish to study abroad. The author is a study abroad alumnus, having completed an internship program in Florence, Italy. The paper is divided up into several sections. These include a review of literature, interviews from advisors in the Office of International Education, advice from former students, and interpersonal communication advice on how to accustom to different cultures when traveling. The advice is broken up by themes that have emerged over the course of this study, including pre-departure concerns, stereotypes, culture shock, adjustment, and study abroad benefits. The participants were interviewed in discussion form, which included several focus groups. The results of this study show that study abroad greatly impacts students' lives in a beneficial way and overseas travel while in school is one of the greatest ways for students to develop into independent adults.

### Review of Literature

As the United States is becoming increasingly internationalized each year, the reasons for students to study abroad are multiplying. Knight and de Wit (1997) define internationalization of higher education as “the process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the institutions” (p. 24). There is a pressure being applied to Western universities to internationalize their programs because universities are seen as a pathway to meet both local and global needs. According to Mazzarol, Soutar, and Seng (2003), there is a great need for international education and this has led students to participate in study abroad programs. These programs have enriched U.S. higher education since World War II.

In a 2009 report conducted by *US News*, The University of Delaware is credited with running the nation’s first study abroad program in 1923 (U.S. News & World Report 2009). Today, study abroad is becoming commonplace for both undergraduate as well as graduate students. According to He & Chen (2010), Europe is the most popular destination for American study abroad students (58%), followed by Latin America (16%), Asia (9%), Australia/New Zealand (6%), and Africa (3%). He & Chen also found that “social sciences (21.7%) is the most studied field, followed by business and management (17.7%), humanities (14.2%), foreign languages (7.8%), fine or applied arts (7.5%), physical or life sciences (6.9%), education (4.1%), health science (3.8%), and engineering (2.9%)” (p. 348).

Study abroad is becoming more popular each year in the United States. With globalization becoming increasingly more important each day, experience abroad is thought to be one of the best ways for young people to gain international experience before entering the work force. It is true that in recent years, the number of students studying abroad has increased dramatically worldwide. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE), the number

of American students studying abroad in 2009 had increased by 8.5% from the previous year, and over the past ten years, the number of American students studying abroad has increased by over 150% (Gardner & Witherell 2009). These figures demonstrate the increasing importance of study abroad programs.

With the statistics clearly showing the popularity of study abroad programs, it is necessary to understand the reasons for participating as well as the benefits. There are a multitude of reasons for study abroad. According to He & Chen (2010), “In a host country students can further their career goals, learn a foreign language, broaden their personal horizons, explore another culture, or visit a country from which their ancestors came” (p. 348). While there is an abundance of opportunities for American students overseas, it seems that the benefits received upon completion outweigh any costs for overseas travel. Studies have found that spending an extended length of time abroad can expand students’ worldview (Carlson & Widaman, 1998), spur intellectual and personal growth (Wilson, 1993), enhance their self-image and sociability (McGuigon, 1984), and create a more positive attitude toward people from other cultures (Sell, 1983). There has also been research that has shown that student exchange programs teach students about multicultural understanding and tolerance towards others (He & Chen 2010, p. 348-349). It has also been found that students who study abroad acquire a broader perspective about the human condition in the world. When American students study overseas, they are exposed to a new sense of history, a widening of horizons, and an appreciation of other cultures as “not right or wrong, but simply different” (Matz, 1997, pp. 120-121).

It is true that it is not only the educators who find study abroad beneficial, but also the government. Senator Richard Durbin gave a tribute to the late Senator Paul Simon, and provided convincing reasoning for studying abroad. Durbin said: “the United States is a military and

economic giant, yet it is continuously threatened by a serious lack of international competence in an age of growing globalization. Our world ignorance is now seen as a national liability” (2006, pg. 4). The late Senator Simon created the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Commission which is a congressional initiative to greatly expand study abroad opportunities for American undergraduate students. The bill itself is a visionary bill created by Senator Paul Simon, to address the need for more Americans to learn more about the rest of the world as a part of their undergraduate education. This legislation has the hope that study abroad will become a norm, rather than an exception for undergraduate students and has goals including increasing the participation in study abroad programs, encouraging diversity in students as well as locations, and making study abroad a cornerstone of today’s higher education (2009, NAFSA).

### **Reasons for Study Abroad**

There are several different psychological reasons that can help to explain a student’s initial intention to pursue study abroad opportunities. One theory that some researchers have used to study behavioral intentions in study abroad is the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). According to Ajzen, TPB is a widely applied social-psychology theory that explains how individuals form intentions and perform behaviors. Basically, the Theory of Planned Behavior suggests that beliefs and their corresponding attitudes influence intentions, which drive actual behavior. According to Goel, Lakshmi, de Jong, Pieter and Schnusenberg (2010), there are three broad categories of beliefs and attitudes. They are: behavioral beliefs and attitudes, normative beliefs and perceived subjective norms, and control beliefs and perceived behavioral control (p. 251). As far as in study abroad, the perception of how important a study abroad program is to achieving personal or career goals would be an example of behavioral beliefs. The authors of this study performed a focus group with 28 African students at two universities in the United

Kingdom. It was concluded that these students came to study in England on the promise of getting a truly international high education experience. This conclusion was supplemented further by the results of Relyea, Cocchiara, and Studdard's 2008 study that showed that "students' propensity to participate on a study abroad trip and the career value increase the likelihood of a student participating in a study abroad program" (Goel et al 2010, p. 251-252).

Besides the pursuit of career goals, significant others can affect a student's intentions to study abroad. These are referred to by Goel et al. as normative beliefs and subjective norms. It is explained that, "Significant others can include those whose opinions the individual values, such as parents, spouses, teachers or superiors" (Ajzen 1991). These social groups have the ability to influence study abroad behaviors. In 2003, Pimpa conducted a study in which 803 Thai students were interviewed and it was found that "family expectations have a strong influence on a variety of factors involved in the decision to study abroad, particularly for undergraduate students."

For the third category, Goel et al. (2010), list factors such as "cost, political situation of the country, economic status, scholarship opportunities" as factors that can affect whether an individual decides to pursue study abroad opportunities. Other aspects that can affect the decision to study abroad are the "the helpfulness of the study abroad staff at the originating university... as is the experience of the professor leading the study abroad course" (pg. 252). Like Pimpa, Srikatanyoo and Gnoth (2005) also focused a research study on a sample of Thai students. The research sample included 23 Thai students studying in New Zealand, in addition to 240 prospective international students in Thailand. Srikatanyoo and Gnoth came to the conclusion that there are six attributes that influenced the Thai students' decision to study abroad at another university and these included, "academic and supporting facilities, academic staff

performances, environmental conditions, entry requirements, academic reputation of a country, and academic reputation of domestic institutions.”

In their research, Goel et al. (2010), studied whether behavioral traits played a role in study abroad intentions, and found that behavioral beliefs are the primary influences of study abroad participation. Goel et al also found that “in terms of influence of personality traits, prior research has shown that conscientiousness, extraversion, and openness to experience are all important for study abroad intentions (p. 261). Overall, Goel et al’s study showed that behavioral traits play a key role in study abroad intentions and “different traits influence different beliefs to differing extents” (p. 261).

### **Culture Shock**

One aspect of study abroad that is often overlooked is culture shock. As the people of the world are being brought closer and closer by quick technological development, there is a growing need for the understanding of cultural diversity. However, an often overlooked aspect of travel is the culture shock that many people experience when arriving in a new country. Junzi Xia (2009) explains that, “During the process of cultural adjustment, difficulties and problems in communication are usually caused by a change of emotion from cheerful and relaxed to sad and depressed. This is a common phenomenon for those who face an unfamiliar culture” (p. 97). Traveling outside of one’s comfort zone, or in the case of study abroad students, overseas, can lead people to experience culture shock.

Researchers have tried to create a concrete definition of culture shock for the past several decades, but today there remains no clear definition. Culture shock is initially credited with anthropologist Kalervo Oberg in 1960, who defined this as “the psychological disorientation experienced by people who suddenly enter radically different cultural environments to live and



work” (Eschbach et al. 2001). It was explained further by Furnham (2010), “as a loss of one’s culture, a marker of moving from one culture to another, and as a resocialisation in another culture. It comes as a ‘hurtful surprise’ to many who travel for various reasons” (p. 87). As Junzi Xia describes, “In recent decades, the peoples of the world have been brought closer and closer by fast technological development in transportation and communication. Today, the rapid globalization of world economies is making the need for understanding cultural diversity become more and more inevitable.”

Culture shock is a perplexing phenomenon, and there have been several attempts to identify its’ components. Junzi Xia believes that verbal language plays the most crucial role in communication, with nonverbal language such as body language and facial expression being secondary. This is not always so straightforward however, as it is often the opposite in high-context cultures. Xia explains, “In most areas of Latin America, Asia, the Middle East and Africa, people usually focus less on what is being said, and nonverbal cues are significant methods of communication” (Mitchell, 2000). It is most often that people experience culture shock when encountering conditions dissimilar to their former cultural norms. Xia explains, “This change or unfamiliarity makes them fail to understand the ideology and behavior of local people so that they do not know why those people behave as they do and how they themselves should behave” (p. 98).

According to Xia, “The negative impact of culture shock on individual psychology often includes a large and diverse set of symptoms.” He explains that “Although not everyone will experience all the symptoms, almost all people will experience some parts.” Adrian Furnham, who works at the University College London in the United Kingdom, studied culture shock intently, and found that most who suffer from culture shock feel:

1. Strain due to the effort required to make necessary psychological adaptations.
2. A sense of loss and feelings of deprivation in regard to friends, status, profession and possessions.
3. Being rejected by/and or rejecting members of the new culture.
4. Confusion in role, role expectations, values.
5. Surprise, anxiety, even disgust and indignation after becoming aware of cultural differences.
6. Feelings of impotence due to not being able to cope with the new environment (Furnham 2010, p. 87).

### ***The Four Stages of Culture Shock***

If an individual hopes to minimize psychological stress, it is often necessary to make preparations for culture shock before going abroad. Xia refers to this pre-departure preparation period as essential and indispensable. It is believed that if an individual is able to make proper use of this stage, the impact of culture shock on psychology will decrease significantly (Cushner 1994).

There are four stages of culture shock, according to Junzi Xia. The first stage is referred to as the “honeymoon stage.” It is during this stage that people may be pleased by all of the new things that they experience. Abarbanel describes this stage as “Euphoria”, and states it occurs, “on arrival” and is “the part students have anticipated” (S135). Abarbanel warns, however, “That many students do not necessarily feel euphoric in the initial weeks – in fact, many students feel confused and disoriented (Ward 2003), but varied and intense mood reactions overall are what’s important” (p. 2009 p. S135). In other words, it is important for students to realize that the initial disorientation and confusion are normal, but to have a variation of moods is crucial.

The next stage may commence after either a few days or a few weeks. It typically begins with “a series of negative experiences and escalating problems.” The culture shock is uncomfortable in this stage because it acts as “inappropriate behaviors in the new cultural environment, which results in a large amount of stress and increasing depression, anxiety, tension and confusion” (Xia 2009, p. 98). Abarbanel calls this stage, “Irritability/hostility” and explains it occurs, “when students later discover that initial positive energy has turned negative.”

After these two stages, the adjustment stage follows. This stage comes with an “increased ability to learn how to adjust effectively to the new cultural pattern.” He explains, “A variety of adaptation will be achieved during this phase, so negative effects of culture shock begin to become less and less.” (Xia 2009, p. 98).

Finally, the fourth stage “is the mastery stage which often comes after one and a half years.” This is only reached by individuals who remain in the new culture for a great amount of time. It is during this stage that “people are able to solve problems and manage new cultures successfully, and symptoms of culture shock disappear largely.” (Janssens, 1995). Those studying abroad are not likely to reach this stage, unless participating in a long term program.

There are many reasons why acquiring an understanding of the four stages of culture shock may provide a large help for all people looking to study abroad. According to Xia, “It is probable that vague and indistinct events may cause more stress. Therefore people should understand what the problems are, and then they can solve them” (p. 98). Also, having a comprehensive understanding of events may decrease stress and help to eliminate negative emotions. In addition, the understanding of this process suggests that “prediction plays an important part in the reduction of stress and psychological disorientation” (Lafreniere & Cramer,

2005). In other words, having an understanding of the impending culture shock pre-departure may help to reduce its' effects so students may have a more enjoyable time.

Culture shock is a strange event for most people. It is difficult to define, as well as difficult to predict. When people experience culture shock, there is a large possibility that their psychological health will be affected, but with knowledge of the stages, the ability to predict what may happen in the next stage is available. This in turn can make facing difficulties and troubles less stressful, and the degree of anxiety, depression, and feeling of helplessness may be alleviated (Jacobs 2003).

### **Emotional Resilience**

Abarbanel (2009) provides advice for moving with emotional resilience between and within cultures and suggests that “the resilience necessary for positive intercultural exchanges involves important psychological variables that are often overlooked by students, faculty and host families” (p. S133). In other words, acquiring an ‘emotional passport’ means developing skills to deal with emotional challenges that are experienced in cultural transitions. Abarbanel uses the term, ‘emotional passport’ to describe the means to acquiring skills to adjust to the effects of culture shock. She defines the ‘emotional passport’ as “a dynamic toolbox of skills learned and practices during the full circle of intercultural exchange: pre-departure, on site and re-entry” (p. S133). Abarbanel feels that those who carry the emotional passport already “recognize that moving between cultures can contribute to high emotional arousal (discomfort, irritability, anger, homesickness, sadness) and understand that disengaging from emotional overload to quiet the mind will contribute to improved focus”(p. S133).

Ambiguity tolerance is a key component of one’s emotional passport. Abarbanel places this skill at the heart of the emotional passport, and she describes it as “a skill most noted as a

building block for mastering intercultural transitions” (2009, p. S133). The mastering of ambiguity tolerance is absolutely necessary for achieving emotional resilience because “the capacity to calm down- self regulate- in the face of strong reactions to uncomfortable or perhaps even disturbing events is a dynamic process” (p. S133-134). It must be understood that this is not an easily acquired skill. She describes that “Sitting with negative thoughts and feelings, perhaps feelings of discomfort in the face of ‘difference’, and embracing multiple points of view is not easily developed” (Abarabel, 2009, p. S133-134). In other words, it may be necessary for students to utilize the aid of teachers and adults involved in their program in order to develop a level of ambiguity tolerance that will help them minimize the effects of culture shock.

Abaranel stresses that the culture shock vocabulary is not a simple model. She lists that “the ability to tolerate normal mood shifts” is a difficult skill to grasp and suggests that many students participating in study abroad trips should reach out for adult support. She warns that without it, “Students’ experiences can be de-railed from the beginning” (S134). She goes on to explain that, “Emotional roadblocks, such as the inability to regulate emotional highs and lows, can contribute to poor rather than successful outcomes” (S134). The mastering of the emotional passport is “a process and, like breathing, not a single event” (2009, p. S134).

As far as culture shock goes, “from a twenty-first century mental health point of view, ‘shock’ is not a normal emotional state, and the use of language that predicts catastrophe sets up students, advisers, and host families for problems”(S135). Abaranel states, “In the intercultural adjustment process, a student can shift from periods of curiosity and enthusiasm to periods of withdrawal, self-doubt and sometimes self-destructive behaviors such as compulsive eating, drinking and/or drug use.” When shock occurs, there are typically intense feelings that can be serious or abnormal, and there are usually intense emotions that come along with

transitions. According to Abarbanel, “the process of growth and change, which is built into international exchanges, demands emotional adjustments which rarely are without challenges, but also rarely shocking or catastrophic” (2009, p. S135). It is reassuring that even though the ‘shock’ aspect of culture shock is not normal, the feelings that follow are typically not dangerous.

### ***Strain and Stress***

It is true that change may cause stress, so “when people enter a new culture, change and unfamiliarity influences their own psychological adjustment and participation in a cultural environment. This psychological confusion and emotional discomfort usually causes a tremendous amount of psychological stress” (Eschbach et al, 2001).

It is interesting that while most people recognize the concept of culture shock immediately, they are often surprised by it when it happens to them. While all the definitions for it typically convey similar meanings, the most common effects are “disorientation, anxious confusion, disease, mental shock, transition shock: it is agreed that culture shock is a disorientating experience of suddenly finding that the perspectives, behaviors and experience of an individual or group, or whole society are not shared by others” (Furnham 2010, p. 87).

Abarbanel created some ideas to assist in disengagement from high arousal, to help students better prepare for the culture shock. By doing this, one can develop one’s own ‘toolbox.’ Some examples are:

- Create periods when cell phones, computers, and other electronics are off limits.
- Support healthy eating, minimizing sugar intake.

- Mindful awareness: through breathing, shift attention to the present. This increases capacity for self-soothing. If you are present in the moment, you are not worrying and feel less helpless.
- Exercise moderates the impact of high arousal, but be sure to include additional strategies to supplement your toolbox
- The arts: use a variety of possibilities around the arts—music, painting, dance, singing, poetry, pottery, all provide respite from high arousal (2009, p. S140).

People have always traveled, and it is likely that they always will. There are many reasons for it, from converting and conquering, to trading, and to learning and settling. As travel is not going to subside, it really is important that people can learn to adapt to a new culture quickly in order to perform their intended tasks effectively in their destination. As Furnham (2010) describes, “students [who study abroad] tend to be young (e.g., twenties), well educated, highly motivated, adaptable, and better off than many of their peers” (p. 89). With the intellectual level of many students today, there is no reason that culture shock should be a concerning problem. There are no grand theories published to explain this phenomenon, but there have been several concepts set forth to describe the intensity of culture shock distress. One of these is described by Furnham (2010) as the culture distance concept, which states simply that “the absolute amount of difference or distance (defined both objectively and subjectively between a sojourner’s own and the host culture is directly proportionally related to the amount of stress or difficulty experienced” (p. 91).

There is another concept that is described as the “functional friendship model” that suggests that it is friendship networks that serve as crucial functions and help travelers overcome various difficulties (Furnham 2010, p. 91). There are a multiple concepts and ideas

that have been researched to help students and travelers acquire skills necessary for overcoming the phenomenon of culture shock. Xia suggests that “becoming familiar with the new environment before departing may be the best method to attain this goal.” He explains that, “The main reason is that it can provide an intellectual tool for better understanding why other individuals or groups of people are similar or different” (2009, p. 99). There seems to be a direct relationship, and that is “The more thorough the understanding of a new culture, the smaller the negative impact there will be, because knowledge about the host culture enhances individual capacity to adjust to the new circumstances” (Coodman, 1994).

Nonverbal behavior can be extremely different from culture to culture and Xia provides an example about physical space between two talkers. He explains, “Compared with Americans, Saudi Arabians are accustomed to standing closer in communication. Twenty inches is a normal distance for Americans but for Saudi Arabians, it means unfriendliness so that they may move closer to make conversation more comfortable.” This type of information is beneficial for American travelers to know because without this knowledge, the Americans are likely to be seen as impolite. Accordingly, when a Saudi Arabian visits the United States, they are the ones to experience psychological disorientation, as they are unprepared to cope with the culture shock (Ferraro 2006).

Having knowledge and understanding of the new culture can provide assistance to individuals traveling. Xia explains, “This may lessen psychological disorientation and make people accept new culture as soon as possible.” He explains further that, “This method may take much time, and it is impossible to understand all aspects of the new cultures, but it is easy to put into practice and effective because of rich data and information.” There are numerous sources to retrieve this information, including, “scholarly sources such as books, journal articles



and other sources like newspapers and the internet” (Ferraro 2006), as well as the manual in the appendix of this study.

The period prior to departure is a crucial one for those who wish to minimize stress causes by culture shock, but a good preparation can only decrease its influence, as culture shock can never be completely avoided. Xia (2009) believes that once culture shock has been encountered, there are three approaches to reduce stress from culture shock: “self-confidence and optimism, accepting new culture, and seeking social support” (p. 99). In other words, maintaining an open mind upon arrival as well as pre-departure, as well as a positive attitude will help to improve the overall experience.

The first approach is self-confidence and optimism. The term self-efficacy meant “the conviction or belief of people that they can overcome the obstacles encountered. According to Xia (2009), “People with high self-efficacy usually believe that they have abilities to perform tasks well. They work harder and experience less anxiety when getting into trouble, because they have full confidence that they will succeed.” On the other side of the spectrum, people with a low self-efficacy, “often believe that they cannot perform works well, so they usually give up easily and experience more anxiety when facing troubles” (p. 99). It is a lack of confidence that is the most important reason for their failure; so therefore, self-confidence plays a vital role in lessening anxiety and overcoming challenges (Aronson et al, 2005).

Optimism goes hand in hand with self-confidence because, as Xia states, “explaining negative events optimistically can decrease depression and anxiety.” He believes that “Although different people use various ways to try to minimize the impact of culture shock on their psychology, it seems that keeping self-confident and optimistic may be the most effective” (2009, p. 99). It should be noted however, that people’s personalities are diverse, and many

people are optimistic and self-confident naturally but others tend to be more pessimistic, and this reality is difficult to change. One extreme instance is that excessively optimistic people “may enter a new environment without any preparation. This will make them experience more serious culture shock” (Ferraro, 2006). Xia believes that a “moderate self-confidence and an optimistic mood are necessary for people to deal with culture shock.”

In addition to self-confidence and optimism, the acceptance of the new culture is a method suggested by Xia (2009). This means that by accepting other cultures’ values and traditions as not positive or negative, but as simply different, individuals will be more comfortable and this will help to alleviate stress. This can be difficult, as not all parts of a culture are able to be accepted. Xia recommends, “Under this condition, tolerance and keeping an open mind toward local culture may be easier than willing acceptance.” It is also important to respect local customs and traditions. Xia explains, “People usually smile when they want to express happiness and friendly attitude in most countries. However, in many Asian countries, smiling is a sign of weakness, and people are likely to talk with each other without smiling.” Without prior knowledge or an acceptance to cultural difference, “People who enter these Asian countries from other cultural backgrounds may feel that local people are unfriendly” (2009, p. 100). Accepting differences with ease may not come naturally, but keeping a tolerant attitude and an open mind will help with the communication and adjustment process (Ferraro, 2006).

Finally, the third recommendation for travelers to alleviate the stress of culture shock is to seek social support. This means receiving, “Consolation, caring, encouragement, advice, approval and help from others around them” (Xia, 2009, p. 100). Xia states that people with friends tend to deal with stress better. He also states, “People who live in cultures that stress

interdependence suffer less from psychological stress than people who live in cultures that emphasize independence.” Xia also suggests for individuals to develop friendly relationships with local people, and insists they will therefore get more social support this way, and states, “others who are not good at social intercourse may fail to do this” (p. 100).

Being aware that there will be emotional highs and lows present when participating in intercultural travel is one of the most important aspects of dealing with culture shock. The capacity to calm down and self regulate while facing uncomfortable situations is a dynamic process (Abarbanel 2009). Working through this process is crucial for study abroad success and the rest of this work is dedicated to providing insight on how to accomplish this. Knowing that culture shock is stressful, but realizing that there are things that people can do is what is important. The Office of International Education can play a role in helping to alleviate stress, therefore I interviewed those who had studied abroad in order to create a manual that can help future study abroad students minimize and deal with culture shock.

### **Methods and Procedures**

Upon completion of this review of literature, a study was conducted to gather information to better prepare future study abroad students. The objective of this research study is to create a manual that will serve as an aid for students who wish to study abroad. To that end information was ascertained through interviews with the staff in the Office of International Education at the College at Brockport, as well as with students who have participated in study abroad trips between the years 2007 and 2010. The College at Brockport has a renowned study abroad program and as per their website, their mission is “to create, implement and facilitate life-changing and extraordinary global opportunities that encourage student intellectual development, cross-cultural understanding and personal growth” ([www.brockportabroad.com](http://www.brockportabroad.com)).

The College at Brockport is located in western New York about 19 miles west of Rochester. There are about 7,100 undergraduate students currently enrolled at the College and the student population is very local based. According to Collegeboard.com, 98% of the undergraduate students are from New York. This affects the results of this study as it is common for students at the college to have never been out of the state, let alone the country.

The interviews were conducted in an office setting on Brockport's campus during the spring semester of 2011. Interviewees ranged from full time staff members who have all traveled extensively internationally, to current Brockport students who have returned recently from study abroad trips.

The participants interviewed were either staff, or students, as previously stated, and the staff members are all study abroad advisors employed at the College at Brockport. They specialize in distinct regions of the world, including: Australia and New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Ireland, and Africa, Asia, Europe, the Caribbean, Latin America, and South American. The majority of the advisors have previous study abroad experience, including overseas study in New Zealand, Mexico, Costa Rica and Ireland. One subject has no study abroad experience, but has traveled separately to 31 countries. Of the student participants interviewed, all of them had spent a minimum of ten weeks overseas. Their experiences ranged from study abroad at a university to internship placements. The countries discussed were Australia, Costa Rica, France, Ireland, Italy, Mexico, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. Subjects were selected based on the fact that they had participated in study abroad and all of them are current students at the College at Brockport. The participants in this study were volunteers and it should be made known that this research study is purely analytical and there was no statistical research conducted.

The interviews were done in discussion form and the participants were given discussion topics and asked to expand. Themes were created after the completion of the interviews from common topics that emerged consistently throughout the interview process.

### **Interview Analysis**

#### **Theme 1: Major Concerns**

To begin this study, the participants were asked what they were majorly concerned with pre-departure. The question was open-ended and gave the students much leeway in responding. The first theme that emerged over the course of this study was student concerns pre-departure. It is natural to worry prior to traveling abroad, especially if one lacks any prior international travel. The fear of the unknown is a huge concern and according to the participants of this study, most first time travelers worry about everything from *friendships*, to *education differences*, to *transportation*, to *being an American in a foreign country*.

#### ***Friendships***

While education and internships were worrisome for the participants, a common theme that arose over the course of this study was making friends abroad. Considering that several of the participants were in their junior or senior year of college during their study abroad trip, it had been at least two or three years since their undergraduate college had begun and therefore had not had to worry about making friends. One student, who studied in Australia for the fall semester of her senior year, explained that she had had the same circle of friends for the first three years of college, and it was strange for her to comprehend the idea of meeting new people, especially in a foreign country. Other students were concerned with living with other international students, especially growing up in western New York, as most had never interacted with foreigners. One student went into detail saying, “I really had no idea what Australians

would be like, or if they liked Americans. I wasn't sure if we would have anything in common and I was really nervous to meet them." Another student agreed saying, "I had not had to make new friends since high school, and I was nervous about being accepted."

While being concerned about making friends was a common theme over the course of this study, the friendships that were made also became a common theme. Each participant listed the friendships that they made over the course of this internship as one of the greatest aspects of their time abroad. One student said, "I still talk to the friends that I made in Australia every single day. These are friends that I will have for the rest of my life and I am already planning on meeting up with them again."

One student described the friendships she made as being "life changing" and said, "There is a bond that is formed when you befriend someone overseas. Having to work together to overcome challenges and deal with issues independent from your parents develops an intense friendship, and I know that the people that I met overseas will be my friends for life."

Several students agreed in unison that another benefit of friendships overseas is having friends all over the country. A student who studied in Europe said, "I made friends from all over the world. If I ever decide to travel again, I have places I can stay all over the world."

### ***Education***

Education was another major concern emerged in this study. Education was more of a concern for the students traveling to Australia, as the education system is much different there. One student explained, "The classes there were only once a week, with maybe a tutorial or lecture. It was very different than Brockport." Another student agreed and said, "It was strange to only go to class once a week. The school was still difficult there, but without as much structure." Students who were interning abroad were concerned with their internships. Most do

not find out their placements until they have already arrived overseas, so this was a subject of worry for most of the students I talked to. Considering the main purpose of study abroad is education, this is a valid concern for students to have.

The students who studied in Australia all agreed that the students in Australia separate school from their social lives more so than American students do. One student said, “In America, we talk about school all the time. Even if we go out at night, you will hear people at the bar talking about what paper they have to do and how hard their test that day was. In Australia, the students do their work, but they don’t talk about it.” An advisor who has studied and worked in Australia agreed and said, “There is a much greater separation between school and social life. The Australians are serious about their school work, but they are also serious about relaxing, and they do not like to mix the two.”

The advisors came to agreement that if a student has no idea what the education style will be like prior to arrival, there is likely to be problems. One advisor said, “It is beneficial to figure out where you are going and what the education system will be like, so there will be less of a shock factor.”

### ***Transportation***

Transitioning from a small town like Brockport, New York to the financial capital of the world like London can be overwhelming for most people. Of the students that I talked to, getting around London was something that provided them with great anxiety. One look at London’s tube map can make most people dizzy, and the thought of acclimating in a new city, adjusting to an internship, making friends, and catching the right city bus can really put strain on a student. One student explained, “I studied the transportation map over and over, but honestly did not think I would ever fully understand how to get anywhere. It was so confusing.” He went on to

say, “After being in the city for a few weeks however, it became second nature.” Another student in London agreed and said, “At first, I honestly thought there was no way I would ever get anywhere on time.”

Students in other cities agreed. One student said, “I was nervous about getting around the city before I left, and upon arrival, I walked in circles around Florence for a few days convincing myself that I would never understand the city. It all seemed the same.” She did agree with the London students and said that, “After three or four days, I couldn’t believe how lost I got, as I began to find my way around.”

### ***Being an American in a Foreign Country***

The mere idea of being an American overseas was a concern for many students. So many countries have negative stereotypes of Americans, and I talked to one student who was extremely nervous to study for the summer in France since she believed that the French look down upon Americans. Moving in with a host family is an uncomfortable thought for most people, and encroaching on someone’s personal territory and invading their home is nerve wracking enough, without them looking down upon your nationality. All of the students that were interviewed agreed that they were nervous that the foreign people would look down upon them due to their American nationality. One student said, “I have heard stories about French people hating Americans and making fun of them. I really did not want to be singled out just because of where I came from.”

I did find however, that students traveling to Latin America were not as concerned with being an American as they had heard that the Latin Americans and Mexicans had an extremely favorable view of the United States. One student who has naturally extremely blonde hair said, “I was excited to go to Mexico and I had heard that they really liked having Americans in



Cuernavaca. The only thing that I did to prepare myself was dye my hair light brown so I would not stand out so much.” Two students who traveled to Costa Rica agreed that being an American was not a concern of theirs.

## **Theme 2: Stereotypes**

A stereotype is a popular belief about a specific group of people. For the purposes of this study, the groups of people are the natives of the foreign countries. Stereotypes can be extremely powerful. They can shape an initial meeting and completely tarnish a first impression.

Throughout the course of this research study I was interested not only in American stereotypes of foreigners, but also what those in foreign countries thought of Americans.

### *Stereotypes of Foreigners*

Another common theme that emerged was that the participants admitted to have a skewed view of foreigners. In this study, both the advisors and the students were asked about stereotypes. The first part of the question was directed towards stereotypes prior to departing for the trip. Multiple advisors have found that there are a significant number of students who display interest in studying in Australia, yet have no clear idea what it is like there. One advisor said, “I am always amazed when students are ready to send their application in, yet have no idea where Australia is located on a map.” Another advisor agreed and described how many prospective students believe that studying in Australia will be consumed with beaches and surfing but said, “yes, the surfing and beaches do exist, but there is so much more. Australia is actually very similar to the United States. Many students do not realize that.”

The students interviewed admitted to having skewed stereotypes of Australians prior to arrival. The most common stereotype was that all Australians would be loud and laid back. One student said, “I honestly felt like everyone would be like ‘Crocodile Dundee’ or similar to the

Outback Steakhouse commercials.” The students all agreed that this was only reality in the outback, near Ayers Rock, where it is extremely rural. The majority of the students found Australians to be loud, energetic, and having fun in college. One student said, “I was shocked by how inviting and excited everyone was towards me. I expected the people to be friendly, but they were really greater than I could have ever imagined.”

While the Australians are generally viewed as friendly and outgoing, one student who was traveling to London for an internship had a different stereotype. The student described how he expected the British to be closed off to strangers and rude towards Americans. This stereotype was proven to be accurate throughout his internship, but only applicable to strangers. He said, “Everyone that I met and talked to was great. It was just the people on the street and subway who were cold.”

One student, who had had extensive travel experience prior to leaving for France believed the French would be brats and look down upon Americans. While most stereotypes in this study were disproved once the subjects arrived in their host country, this study found the French tended to have the most negative feelings towards Americans. One student described how it was difficult to gauge the French because once they realized they were associating with Americans, their attitudes generally changed. After studying in Mexico and Costa Rica previously, it was a big change for this student, as the previous two countries welcome Americans with open arms. The student explained, “My host mother was pleasantly surprised with us. She thought we would all be bratty and rude, and said she was shocked to genuinely enjoy American people’s company.”

The participants in this study admitted to thinking of British people as being cold and distant, and viewed the French as snobby and rude. Most of the participants had more mixed

stereotypes for the Italians. The stereotype most commonly associated with the Italians was beautiful, welcoming people. One student explained, “I imagined getting off of the airplane and seeing dozens of beautiful people. I envisioned love and happiness filling Italy, and while this does exist in doses, it is certainly not reality.” Another student had a different feeling. The student said, “I prepared myself to be relaxed because I just envisioned Italy to be loud and chaotic. I did not know if Italy would be a dirty place because it seemed that half of the people I talked to said it was, and the other half said it was amazing.” The students in this study seemed to be fascinated by Italy, but there were contrasting opinions about what Italy would be like from the different students who traveled there.

Most students have stereotypes for countries in Europe and Australia, but the participants of this study who studied in Latin America admitted to having more of a fear of the unknown. The majority of students were nervous about their host families because they did not know what to expect. One student said, “We see people on television all the time from Australia and Europe, but people from Costa Rica are generally not publicized as much.” Seeing people from other countries in television shows helps to create stereotypes, so when students travel to countries that are not favored in the entertainment industry such as Costa Rica, or New Zealand, there is an element of the unknown added.

A stereotype is a powerful notion and can shape whether a student chooses to even look into studying abroad in a certain country. One country with the most incorrect stereotypes found in this study was Mexico. The majority of students that I talked to who traveled to Mexico had no idea what to expect. Their initial thoughts were to be small people wearing sombreros and eating tortilla chips. Other students were concerned for their safety, while some did not realize how much there was to Mexico outside of the popular tourist destinations such as Cancun and

Cozumel. One student said, “My mom made me dye my hair from blonde to brown so I would fit in better. She was concerned for my safety and felt that the people would not like Americans. This could not be further from reality.” Every student interviewed in this study found Mexico to be completely different from their initial thoughts. Out of all of the countries and cities discussed, the greatest number of students wanted to return to Cuernavaca, Mexico for a greater length of time and found the people to be extremely accommodating and inviting.

Stereotypes are simply a tiny impression on an enormous place. There is always more to a destination than its’ stereotype, and one of the greatest lessons a young person can learn is to have their stereotype proven wrong.

### *Stereotypes Foreigners Have of Americans*

A separate section of this study is designated to stereotypes of Americans by foreigners. The data that was gathered throughout the course of this study helped to generate this theme. When the participants were asked to discuss foreign stereotypes, the majority of them brought up American stereotypes as well. It can be beneficial to have an awareness of what one is thought of when traveling, and there was a wide array of responses gathered.

#### *Uptight & Rude*

A common theme that arose when discussing American stereotypes, is that the participants of this study have found that foreign people believe Americans to be uptight and rude. A student who interned in London recalled that many British people he encountered said that the British people think that Americans are “know it all types, and we [Americans] think we are better than everyone.” He went on to explain that many people he met in London confessed to being surprised that he was polite, as they thought of Americans as being extremely rude. The student recalled one day on the subway when he encountered a local man who told him that he

“must be bloody mad to be proud to be an American.” Another student agreed with the negative stereotypes about Americans overseas and said that her host mother in France told her that the French people think that Americans are brats, and was pleasantly surprised when the American students she met were genuinely pleasant.

Another common stereotype is that Americans are extremely uptight. This was brought up repeatedly when talking to students who had studied in Australia and New Zealand, which is ironic, as all of the advisors who were interviewed came to an agreement that the most laidback students are the ones who study in Australia and New Zealand. One student discussed how she was considered a laid back American by her family and friends, and the perceptions that the Aussies had of Americans did not hold up. She said, “They thought that being from New York would make me more uptight, and they assumed everyone from California would be more of a hippy.” Another student who studied for a semester in Australia agreed that when the Aussies found out that she was from New York, they assumed that she was uptight and high maintenance.

The participants of this study also came to an agreement that Americans also have a tendency to be rude and self centered when traveling. There was an incident recalled by a student in Florence, Italy when an American family burst into a small café and were acting boisterous and yelling to one another. The café owner was visually upset and the family all started yelling at him in English, failing to even consider the fact that the man did not speak English. The family was upset because they could not find the “Duomo”, which is the main focal point in Florence, nearly impossible to miss, and located on the same street at the café.

The term egocentrism came up several times throughout this study. The majority of the students interviewed who studied in non-English speaking countries reported that it frustrated the

local people when American travelers assume that everyone speaks English already. One student who studied in Italy discussed how many shop owners and restaurant workers in Florence dislike when Americans enter their shops because it is very common not to ask if the workers speak English, but instead just make an immediate assumption and speak English to them. One student said, “A café worker that I befriended asked me how I would feel if I was working back home in New York and a French man came in and started speaking French to me. I guess I would feel taken aback.” There was a different student who agreed that this happens frequently in Italy and recalled when some friends that she met decided to speak Spanish to the shop owners in Florence since their Italian was not up to par. She said, “The shop owners were furious. Even though the Spanish and Italian languages have similarities, they are still two separate languages and the Italians did not understand how American students did not seem to respect that.”

### **Theme 3: Favorable Opinions**

While there was much discussion about the negative stereotypes of Americans, it should be noted that favorable opinions emerged as a theme as well. There is a tendency for some of the world to look down upon Americans; there was a great amount of students who studied in Mexico and Latin America who reported that the people in these regions love Americans. One student who participated in three separate study abroad trips reported that out of Costa Rica, Mexico and France, the Costa Ricans and the Mexicans she met thought extremely highly about Americans, while it was the French who did not. She said, “The Costa Ricans were fascinated by the American culture and many of them discussed that they wanted to move to the United States one day.” A different student who completed an internship at a hospital in Mexico said that the Mexicans she met were fascinated by American medicine and looked at our culture and health care system with high regard.

**Theme 4: Drinking**

A common theme that appeared consistently throughout the course of the study was “drinking.” A common mistake that many students make is to think that studying abroad is an extended spring break. When asked what local people from their study abroad destinations thought of Americans, the most common response gathered was that “Americans are drunks.” One student recalled when an Italian man said, “We can always pick out the American girls in Florence because they are wasted screaming in the streets. An Italian girl would never act like that.” A subject interviewed about Australia agreed with this, and said, “In Australia, they do not allow drunk people in the bars. It is more of a social event and binge drinking is looked down upon.”

Generally foreigners think of Americans as partiers, and a large part of that is due to how drinking is presented here. The students who had returned from Australia described how the drinking age is 18 there, but if one is 17, they can still go into the bar to hang out with their friends, but they must be breathalyzed upon entering and exiting. A student said, “This makes it so much more of a social event. Everyone still hangs out at the bar, but the people who are of age do not want to get wasted and make the younger people feel uncomfortable.”

Drinking is not made as big of a deal in other countries as it is in the United States. One subject recalled seeing a man driving with a beer in Mexico, yet no one seemed to mind. While 21<sup>st</sup> birthdays are monumental for Americans, being of age to drink is not as celebrated in other countries. A student in France said that her host family served wine at every meal, even to the children as young as nine years old. One advisor said, “I like to use the comparison of being social versus the mission to get hammered. That is what the difference is when you travel, and obviously the mission to get hammered refers to how it is in the United States.” She continued

further by saying, “I always think it is interesting when students here [in the United States] brag about how they blacked out, or vomited from drinking, because overseas, that is so looked down upon and people would be ashamed rather than proud.”

The Office of International Education frequently sees drunken injuries. One advisor said, “Once a semester, people go to the hospital for drinking. One student cracked his head open. One student in London broke his vertebrae.” It is especially common for drinking to occur excessively on faculty led trips. Several advisors discussed how they have heard of several students sleeping through excursions during faculty led trips due to bad hangovers. One participant said, “This only perpetuates stereotypes. It is just different drinking in other countries and is not as big of a deal to them. It makes us, as Americans, look bad when we cannot even wake up the next morning in their country due to getting too drunk.”

### **Theme 5: Culture Shock**

Regardless of how prepared one may be prior to departing for a study abroad trip, there is bound to be at least a slight amount of culture shock. In this study, the study abroad advisors were asked to discuss culture shock and to provide advice for students to overcome it.

One advisor believes that the best way to overcome culture shock is to treat the initial days in the new country like a vacation. She said, “Give yourself a week and do not think of it as three months. See what there is to see in the city and enjoy it.” She recommends taking a tour of the city and doing tourist activities to get one acquainted with the new surroundings. She also recommends taking a bus and using the resources and support systems. One participant agreed that taking a bus is a great way to get acquainted with the city. He said, “We were so overwhelmed with the city of Dublin that we took one of those cheesy bus tours and it was



actually a lot of fun. We were able to learn so much about the city before we started our internships.”

There is a dedicated resident director in most programs so it is beneficial to utilize them. Other advisors agreed with this and one said, “It is important to get out in the city and take action. I hate to hear about students sitting in their dorm or apartment.” A different advisor agreed with this and said, “The energy that one puts out comes back, so it is best to make the most of your situation.”

For many students, study abroad is the first time for them to be out of the state. The College of Brockport has a very local class and there is likely to be culture shock regardless of how prepared one may be. One advisor who specializes in Australian programs agrees that there is always culture shock. She said, “Both Australia and New Zealand are similar to the United States, but I really believe it is important for students to stay off of Facebook and email when they first arrive.” The advisors all agreed that initial culture shock is difficult and one advisor said, “It is so easy to get sad and homesick when you are looking at what your friends are doing at home.”

Advice that was given by several advisors, as well as by the students is to get out of one’s comfort zone. One advisor said, “Go to cultural events and take the time to meet new people.” A student who has been on three trips agreed and said, “It is so important to meet new people, not only those studying abroad, but also local people in the country. It is easy to seize up when you arrive in a foreign country, but if students take the time to understand the people, it really does make it easier to assimilate to the new culture.”

The advisors and the students alike agreed that the grocery store is a great place to go to overcome culture shock. One participant said, “There is new food and this is a great place to

meet new people.” Another participant said, “When I went to the grocery store for the first time in Australia, I was able to see how similar the Australians really were to Americans. It relaxed me and I realized that I could get used to living on the other side of the world.”

### **Daily Routine**

One’s schedule does not have to change dramatically simply due to study abroad. One student who traveled to Italy admitted to having anxiety about not being able to exercise once she arrived in Florence. She said she was used to running every day in America and once she got to Italy she felt uncomfortable being out of her routine. She said, “I was able to get used to the different food, the different people and the schedule, but I was not able to get used to not exercising, so I made time. It was my stress reliever.” The advisors and the students both agreed that if a student is used to doing something every day, whether it is art or exercise for example, there is no reason to stop just because one is in a different country. Most students agreed with this and one said, “Once I continued with my morning run, I felt so much better and less stressed about being in a new place.” A few of the participants admitted they felt silly for being concerned with not being able to work out, but all agreed that once they got the opportunity to exercise, their stress levels lowered. A student said, “I thought it was dumb that I was scared to come back home from Europe having gained weight, but this was really the last thing I wanted to do. Exercise helped me maintain my figure, as well as alleviate some of the stress of a completely different culture.”

### **Looking for Similarities Rather Than Differences**

Looking for similarities rather than differences in the new country is advice that came from the advisors as well as the students. One student who studied in Australia said, “I had a bit of culture shock, but only because it reminded me of home. The people were similar, but it also

made me realize how far I was.” Another student who went to Australia, agreed and said, “It was just weird to think that this country on the other side of the world was so similar to where I came from. I had a hard time wrapping my head around that.”

A student who completed an internship in Florence said, “Once I hung out with my Italian work friends, I realized that we really did have a lot in common. They watch the same television shows that I do and like the same music.” Another student agreed and said, “I really felt more at home when I realized that one of the Italians that I was working with was having boyfriend problems. I was able to relate to her and it was so interesting seeing people on the other side of the world dealing with the same problems that I do.”

The advisors all stressed that foreigners are not extremely different. There is still grocery shopping, leisure time, and daily routines that are often extremely similar to the United States. One advisor said, “Traveling has made me realize that people are not necessarily different. There are so many human similarities. I am still amazed when I am in places as far away as Russia or Egypt and realize how similar people act.”

### **Customs and Culture**

Another theme that transpired during the course of this study was that it is important to understand the culture and customs of the country one visits. If students have an awareness of the norms prior to arrival in the new country, it may be easier to overcome the initial shock. One student who studied in Mexico recalled when she got into trouble with her host family for bringing a friend over without asking. She said, “This is something we would not think twice about at home, but the Mexicans thought it was extremely disrespectful for not asking permission.”

Other students agreed that it would have helped to alleviate culture shock had they looked up the norms of the country prior to departure. Students who studied in Western Europe said it was strange for the entire city to shut down at the end of July for holidays. One student said, “I went to my favorite café one day in France, only to see that it was closed for a month for summer vacation. Looking back, it is relaxing that they shut down for a whole month, but this would never happen in America. I wish I would have known this was commonplace.”

Looking for similarities rather than differences will help to curtail initial culture shock. One student recalled watching a group of Italian teenagers on a train one day. She said, “I just watched them interact with each other, and even though I could not understand what they were saying, I realized they act very similarly to American teenagers, joking and messing with each other.” She went on to explain how this made her feel more at ease in Italy, and it was easier to overcome the shock of being in a new culture.

### **Uncomfortable Situations**

Another consistent theme that emerged about culture shock was that it was most experienced when the students were in uncomfortable situations, which can also occur in the United States. One student who traveled to London said, “The first few days were rough, and I didn’t know anyone. The bus system and the subway were confusing.” He did not like his roommate and said, “Until I found a good place to live I wanted to come home, but this can happen in America. Too many students chalk up negative experiences to the foreign country, rather than taking control for themselves and making the situation better.” The student with the negative roommate story compared his experience to his freshmen year in the United States when he did not get along with his roommate. He said, “We were very different and it was actually extremely similar to what happened in London. I knew that I could not blame my bad

experience on the United Kingdom, but rather on some bad luck that could have occurred anywhere.”

### **Personality Differences between Cultures**

A common theme that came about in this study was attitudes in foreign countries. A student, who dubbed herself as being high-strung, admitted to experiencing some culture shock in Costa Rica, as she found the Costa Ricans to be extremely laid back. She said, “Nothing seemed to bother the Costa Ricans, which was strange for me, because I tend to get worked up over little things.” This laid back feeling was also felt by many students who studied in Australia. One student said, “I experienced a bit of culture shock in Australia because the people there were so laid back and there was literally no rush. Everyone was so calm and it was strange to me.”

The students in Italy also experienced some culture shock due to the different attitudes in Italy. One student said, “It was shocking for me to be in a café having my drink made by a worker when one of his friends walked in. He would immediately stop making my cappuccino and talk to his friend.” Another student agreed and said, “It was so weird to me how laid back the Italians were. There are no plans ever and they did not seem to care about anything.” The students admitted this was extremely stressful at first, but after getting used to it, they all agreed it was refreshing and many of them said they carried the aspects of the foreign lifestyles back to the United States.

### **Theme 5: Adjusting**

The participants in this study were asked about the adjustment period, and what they did to overcome it. All of the advisors came to accord that keeping an open mind is a necessary part

of adjusting to a new place. One advisor shared a story that was told to her before her first trip abroad. She said:

“There was a story about an old woman who traveled to Greece and upon arrival, she absolutely hated it. She wrote home over and over again about how different and terrible it was. She insisted she would never travel again and complained about all aspects of the country. Her family and friends in America read her letters and felt sorry for her. After being in Greece for a few weeks, she grew to appreciate the differences and began to enjoy her time there. When she got back, she wanted to share her experiences, but she had vocalized her negativity so loudly that her stories were tarnished.”

An advisor said, “When things are different, most people hate them, but try to appreciate the differences.” Another advisor agreed and said, “Keep your judgments quiet because after awhile you might change your mind and become embarrassed for broadcasting your negativity.”

All of the student participants in this study agreed that, no matter what happens, it is important to not shut down. One student said, “The first week of my experience in Italy was a series of unfortunate events.” She went on and said, “I had everything happen from losing my luggage, to breaking my favorite pair of sandals, to losing my debit card. I had two choices: to lay in my apartment and cry, or move forward. I ended up choosing the latter and I had the best summer of my life.”

### **Technology**

An aspect of the adjustment period that was agreed upon by the advisors and students alike was how important it is to refrain from sitting on one’s computer or cell phone while overseas. One student said, “When I first got to France, I skyped with my friends from home for

a couple hours every day, and all it did was make me more homesick.” An advisor said, “If students sit and talk to their parents on the phone or on Skype, it is hard to adjust.” Another advisor came to agreement with her and said, “It is crucial for students to stay off Facebook and email upon initial arrival. There is always going to be an adjustment period, and it is that much harder to overcome when students are looking at what their friends are doing at home.” Some schools overseas have internet quotas, so unless students wish to pay extra money, there is not much time for surfing the web. One student said, “The quota was annoying at first, but actually a blessing as it forced me to get outside and acclimate to the culture.”

One student believes that looking at Facebook is a mistake when a student first arrives overseas. He said, “It showed me everything that I was missing out on at home, which made me wish I was there.” He went on to explain, “I should not have seen everything going on at home as what I was missing, but rather, I should have embraced everything in London and realized what an incredible experience I was having.”

### **Focus Attention in Healthy Ways**

Advice that was provided by both the students and the advisors is to get involved in the country you study in. One student said, “I play field hockey in the United States, so I joined a club field hockey team in Australia.” Another student said, “Getting involved in the events that happen in the dorms or on the campus helps one get closer to the local people there.” Similar to the field hockey team, a student in Australia joined a local sports team in Australia called Net Ball. She said, “It got me involved and the team bonding was helpful for the adjustment process.” She went on to say, “It was also a lot of fun.”

### **“Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff”**

One student who traveled to Australia said her advice for overcoming the adjustment period would be to repeat the phrase, “It can’t get worse” to oneself. She said, “I honestly expected more when I first got to the university. My luggage was lost, and I was much more on my own than I expected to be.” A different student who traveled to Italy agreed with her and said, “I lost my luggage and had my apartment switched last minute. There was a series of bad events and suddenly it hit me that it really couldn’t get worse.” The students all agreed that even if it starts out bad, it will get better. An advisor said, “We do everything we can in the office to ensure the students’ trip goes smoothly, but there is only so much we can do. Much of the outcome of the experience lays on the students’ ability to handle the stress of the adjustment period.”

One student who studied in Mexico told a story of her roommate. She said that her roommate was very nervous about the trip, and after two days she decided she was leaving. She said, “There was a bug in her room and she said she was grossed out and wanted to leave. We had a meeting and could not persuade her to stay, so she sat in her room for several days until she got a flight out.” The student who stayed in Mexico said, “I never saw another bug in my room, and ended up having an amazing time, but she couldn’t get over the differences from the United States.”

### **Taking Control for Oneself**

Taking control for oneself is also advice that is shared by both the students as well as the advising staff. An advisor said, “My advice is to take control for oneself. If a student is making his or her parents fill out the application, there is a change that he or she is not ready to go abroad.” Another advisor agreed and said, “People tend to complain over nothing.” She went on to tell a story about a student who traveled to London. She described how last winter in the



United Kingdom there was more snow than expected and said, “A student’s mother called and yelled at us because her daughter couldn’t explore the city.”

An advisor who remembered this incident shared a different one: “I remember a girl who went to Ireland for a semester and only brought 200 US dollars. You can’t last in American with that amount of money, so why did she think she would in Ireland. You need to be financially prepared.” Another advisor said, “If there is not a microwave, learn to deal. When you have never had to deal with problems yourself and you go overseas, the problems don’t just go away.”

### **Benefits**

One of the most important themes that came about throughout this study is that traveling is important. The advisors all emphasized that study abroad is one of the only opportunities to travel for an extended period of time while still accomplishing one’s educational goals. One advisor said, “There is really no other way to get this experience at school and it also looks really good on a resume.” She went on to say, “These are avenues for interviews. It really opens your mind.”

Regardless of where you are from, studying abroad really pushes one out of their comfort zone. An advisor said, “If a student is from Brockport, and goes to school at Brockport, it really gives them a shove out of their comfort zone and allows them to see the world in a new light. A different advisor, who has been to 31 countries, believes, “Study abroad is possible. It is beneficial because people are able to learn more about oneself when traveling.” She said, “From all my travels, I have found that people are not necessarily different, and there are so many human similarities. Traveling and studying abroad allows students to understand not only the world, but also oneself.”

All of the students who were interviewed in this study recommend study abroad. One participant insisted that when students come back from their study abroad trips, life in general is so much better. One student said, “I learned I can do things on my own. For example, before I studied abroad, I needed someone to go to the bathroom with me. I hated to be by myself, but when you come back from being abroad, you learn how to be independent.” Another student agreed, and said, “I appreciate different things and other places more. It has helped with all aspects of my life, including jobs and graduate school.”

A consensus that came about from the student interviews as well as discussions with the advisors is that study abroad gives one an idea about how other people live and gets people out of their bubble. When one student was asked if he would recommend study abroad, he said, “One hundred percent yes. It was an unreal experience and I learned more in two months than ever before. It was awesome.”

All of the advisors agreed that there really is not a downside to study abroad. One said, “The cliché really is true: Studying abroad changes lives. Some people do learn while overseas that it is something they never want to do again, but this is still good to know, and it is something that students will remember for the rest of their lives.”

### **Discussion**

Upon completion of this study, it was interesting that study abroad seems to be recommended by everyone who partakes in it. It was interesting that several of the participants in my study had had some negative experiences, yet still referred to their time abroad as the best times of their lives. The negative experiences seemed to shape the trip, and it seemed that many of the obstacles that the students overcame made them appreciate their time abroad even more.

Throughout the study, I did not find that any students had concerns about study abroad that were out of the ordinary. The concerns that were brought up were valid concerns for people traveling overseas by themselves. Most of the students were concerned with the greatest aspects of studying abroad, such as friendships, education, and acclimating to daily life in a foreign country.

One interesting note that I found while conducting this study was the different viewpoints towards Americans. The majority of participants interviewed who spent time in Western Europe reported that they found the people there to have negative views of Americans, yet Western Europe is a popular travel destination for people in the United States. On the other hand, the participants who went to Mexico and Latin America said that they found that many students who traveled there looked down upon the Mexican and Latin American cultures, yet found the local people there to view the American people and culture in a positive light. It became evident while writing this that many Brockport students seem to have a skewed view of the world.

I was interested over the course of this study in the reasons why students chose the countries that they did. While there were the obvious Spanish and French majors choosing Mexican and France, respectively, I was curious why some people were dead set on studying in Australia, while others only considered the United Kingdom. I found that many students are nervous to travel to a non-English speaking country, which is understandable, except most of the destinations are in tourist destinations like Florence, Italy or Paris, France where there are many English speakers and Americans already. Other students chose destinations based on their heritage, which was why I chose to go to Italy. One aspect that was interesting about students who chose to go to Australia is that they wanted to go where it is warm and sunny. Attending

college in upstate New York makes people crave sunshine, and I found in my study that the participants associated warm, sunny beaches with Australia.

Another interesting finding in my study is that the students who traveled to Australia found that most Australians consider New Yorkers to be uptight, while the Office of International Education advisors agree that the most laid back students are the ones they send to Australia. It would be interesting to see what the Australian people would think of an uptight person by American standards

One thing that I wish that I had found in my study was a student who did not enjoy his or her time abroad. I think it would have been interesting to analyze what made their time un-enjoyable when the majority of students love it.

The results of my study showed that students who study abroad overwhelmingly rave about their time overseas. Regardless of which destination they chose or what they did there, the students interviewed all admitted they would go back in a heartbeat. This was interesting, because regardless of any cultural differences or challenges presented by living overseas, the participants in this study overwhelming loved being abroad. Whether this is credited to international travel, or the jobs of the staff in the Office of International Education at the College at Brockport, study abroad is extremely popular and is likely to only grow in participant numbers.

### **Appendix: Manual for Brockport Students Who Plan to Study Abroad**

Based upon data gathered from this study, I have created a manual for potential study abroad students. The advice provided is gathered from my research and supported from interviews with the study abroad advisors at The College at Brockport and the students who have participated on study abroad trips.

#### **Pre-Departure Advice**

- Research your country
  - Can you find it on a map?
    - Do you know the major landmarks in your city?
  - Customs & Culture
    - What are the norms there?
    - What do people wear?
    - Do you know the communication differences?
  - Education
    - Do you know about the education system in your destination?
    - What are the classes like?
- Research your program
  - Is it an independent based internship, or more of a university?
    - Is there free time, or are there planned events?
  - Do you have a rough idea of what you will be doing there?
  - Make sure you do not get stuck on a program based on the destination.

## Upon Arrival

- Culture Shock Advice
  - Recognize that you will experience culture shock!
    - “During the process of cultural adjustment, difficulties and problems in communication are usually caused by a change of emotion from cheerful and relaxed to sad and depressed. This is a common phenomenon for those who face an unfamiliar culture” (Xia 2009, p. 97).
  - Keep an open mind!
    - “Don’t sweat the small stuff!”
    - No matter what happens, don’t shut down.
    - Try not to pass judgments
  - Work to develop your “Emotional Passport”
    - If you have this, you “recognize that moving between cultures can contribute to high emotional arousal (discomfort, irritability, anger, homesickness, sadness) and understand that disengaging from emotional overload to quiet the mind will contribute to improved focus”(Abarbanel, 2009, p. S133).
    - Have ambiguity tolerance
      - “The capacity to calm down- self regulate- in the face of strong reactions to uncomfortable or perhaps even disturbing events” (Abarbanel 2009 p. S133-134).
  - Treat the initial days as a vacation
    - Explore the city

- Take a bus tour
- Go see your Resident Director
  - Ask them if there are planned activities
- Get Involved
  - Join a club sports team
  - Attend the events planned
- Meet New People
  - Go to the Grocery Store
  - Walk Around!
  - Meet the locals

### **Adjusting**

- Turn off your computer!
  - Try not to sit on Facebook & Skype
  - Get out and explore!
- Take advantage of all opportunities
- Continue familiar habits when possible
- Look for the similarities rather than the differences
  - Embrace the differences you do notice
- Try not to vocalize any negativity
  - Remember, you may regret it!
- Take control for yourself!
  - Learn to deal with obstacles
- Enjoy this once in a life time opportunity and have fun!

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## Appendix

**Interview Questions**

- Where did you travel and why did you choose this destination?
- Have you had any international travel experience prior to your study abroad trip?
- Before you left for your trip, what were your major concerns?
- Did you do anything to prepare for your study abroad trip?
- What stereotypes did you have prior to departure of your destination country?
  - Did you find foreigners to have stereotypes of Americans?
- Did you experience homesickness?
- Did you experience culture shock?
- What advice would you give to overcome culture shock?
- Do you have any advice for adjusting to a new culture?
- Do you have any advice in general for study abroad?
- Would you recommend study abroad?
  - Why/Why not?
- What issues/challenges did you experience?
  - How did you overcome them?
- Do you have any stories to share about your experiences?