

Study Abroad: A Powerful New Approach for Developing Leadership Capacities

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Abstract

Participation in a leadership-focused study-abroad program is a highly effective way to learn about leadership, based on student responses that cite powerful leadership learning experiences. To operate effectively in the expanding global arena, current and future leaders will need the ability to deal with different cultures and languages almost on a daily basis. Leaders will need to be prepared to lead in fast-changing environments that include a multiplicity of cultures and traditions and a complex labor force. While traditional approaches to leadership education will continue to provide a firm foundation for tomorrow's leaders, new leadership approaches will be as important, if not more so, in the global world. A leadership-focused study-abroad program offers an excellent teaching technique for preparing participants in the leadership process.

The Role of Study Abroad in Leadership Education

Participation in a leadership-focused study-abroad program offers leadership learning experiences for future leaders. Such experiences are vital as leaders will find themselves dealing with different cultures and languages almost on a daily basis. Moreover, this situation will likely intensify due to ever-increasing globalization.

Recent participants in Ohio State University's leadership-focused study-abroad program expressed in compelling statements the value of their leadership learning experiences and the effect of those experiences on their philosophy of leadership. Their statements gave potent testimony to the worth of study abroad in providing opportunities for leadership learning. Moreover, the students' statements confirmed that the leadership advantages of these experiences go far beyond the usual and obvious benefits of visiting other lands, learning about other cultures, and opening one's mind to new possibilities.

In the words of the participants, experiences in this program allowed the students to learn the value of listening; to learn how to solve problems; how to let everyone interact in a group and work as a team while accepting everyone; how to step up and get the job done when it would not get done otherwise; and how to be a better person when in unusual situations. The students also reported that participation in this study-abroad program allowed them to learn their own strengths and weaknesses during a period of personal leadership growth. They reported gaining insight into their own character and learning about themselves as leaders as well.

This paper explores changes in leadership in today's world and describes the new type of leader that today's and tomorrow's society requires. Next, this paper examines the leadership-focused study-abroad program and its importance in terms of educating this new leader. Comments from student participants give potent testimony to worth of this educational approach. Finally, the paper explores the implications of the study-abroad approach and the challenges facing leadership educators who seek to use study abroad to teach leadership skills.

Today's Society Requires a New Type of Leadership

In today's and tomorrow's world, leaders will need the ability to operate effectively in the global arena. On almost a daily basis, leaders will find themselves dealing with different cultures and languages. This situation will likely intensify due to the ever-increasing globalization of the world — the global economy; the instant access to people and information through the Internet, distance education, and conferencing; and the ease of travel that makes far reaches of the world readily accessible for those who wish or need to go there.

As a result of globalization, the type of leadership required in society as a whole is changing (Apps, 1994; Handy, 1989, 1994; Kotter, 1996; Rost, 1992). Traditional approaches to leadership focus upon the leader's ability to work with and through others (i.e., transactional leadership). While these leadership competencies will continue to be a firm foundation for tomorrow's leaders, new leadership approaches will be as important, if not more so. These newer approaches — transformational leadership — use a leader's firm personal values and philosophy of leadership in order to create and communicate a shared organizational vision for the future; manage the ambiguity inherent in complex and rapid social and technological change; build bridges between people and ideas, communities and commodities; and develop and sustain effective empowered teams in the workplace.

These new leadership approaches require new skills on the part of future leaders. It will not be enough for tomorrow's leaders to just be technically competent, or only know individuals within their own community or with whom they work, or remain at the same job until they retire. Future leaders will need to be prepared to lead under diverse, fast-changing environments. Leaders will have to understand a

multiplicity of cultures and traditions, while dealing with a complex labor force. At the same time, they will have to motivate followers who show less loyalty under a more individualistic frame of reference. The leader of the twenty-first century will have to be the glue that will tie organizations/communities together. (Perruci, 1999, p. 59)

This demand for new leadership skills has given rise to concern that colleges and universities are graduating students who may have expert technical or subject-matter skills, yet be deficient in the critical leadership and citizenship skills necessary to be successful in today's workplace and diverse society. As a result, the connection between a student's academic program and that student's future occupation and responsibilities as a citizen has become increasingly important in recent years.

Employers Want Leaders, Not Just Subject Matter Experts

Contemporary careers demand much more of college graduates than merely being subject-matter experts in a focused discipline area (Bosshamer, 1996). Today's employers demand not only technical expertise within a focused area but also broader interpersonal and organizational skills critical to successful business and industry. Examples include team building, multifaceted problem solving, critical thinking, visioning, and change management, each of which is an integral component of leadership (Kotter, 1996; Kouzes and Posner, 1995).

Within the past 25 years, numerous scholars, citizens, and authors have reexamined the role of higher education in preparing an educated citizenry, tomorrow's leaders. Although no authors disagree with the role of the university in transferring highly specialized knowledge within the scope of academic and professional disciplines, several espouse the need to reexamine the relationship of such knowledge within the larger societal context (Bok, 1980; Boyer, 1987). Lynton and Elman (1987) suggest that "universities, in their teaching as well as in their other professional activities, relate theory to practice, basic research to its applications, and the acquisition of knowledge to its use" (p. 3). Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff (1997) summarize this new perspective by stating: America's colleges and universities need a fresher, more capacious vision of scholarship...a new paradigm that views scholarship as having four separate but overlapping dimensions: the scholarship of discovery, the scholarship of integration, the scholarship of application, and the scholarship of teaching. (p. 9). Universities and colleges can address these four dimensions through leadership development programs and activities on their local campuses as well as through their study-abroad programs.

All of this has a direct bearing on leadership and how universities educate and develop those leaders. According to Trubek: The first challenge is to rethink what our students need today and what they will need 20 years from now to operate effectively in the international arena. A much larger percentage of the student

body will need to develop international skills in the future than has been the case in the past (p. 312). Perruci (1999) argues that the development of leadership studies programs is directly impacted by the internationalization of labor. Therefore, leadership development urgently needs to prepare students “who can understand (and survive) globalization” (p. 58).

Contemporary businesses and industries recognize that an educated and motivated workforce not only is critical to organizational, financial, and commodity goals but also serves as an important link to the broader community. For example, consider the results of the visioning phase of The Ohio State University’s strategic planning effort involving its College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences. During this phase, stakeholder focus groups indicated that the college needs to “educate the ‘whole’ student; develop critical thinking, creativity, and leadership skills in addition to technical, scientific information” (CFAES, 1996). These same stakeholders also stated that the college needs to “increase ‘hands-on’ learning experiences” (CFAES, 1996) in the curriculum. According to these stakeholders, universities and colleges must take a deeper look into their curriculum to ensure that the students’ education includes preparation for the workforce and living in the local as well as the global community.

This expressed need for leaders who have the interpersonal and organizational skills that would allow them to operate effectively in a global society points up the need for effective ways to develop these leaders. Educating this new breed of leaders calls for new approaches to leadership development. Leadership-focused study-abroad programs offer the powerful learning experiences needed to undertake this new role.

Study-Abroad: Preparation for Leadership

Leadership development is a strong component of land-grant institutions and ranges from grass-roots leadership development through cooperative extension programs to discipline-focused programs such as the adult agricultural Leadership Education and Development (LEAD) program. Historically, the discipline of agriculture has structured and encouraged traditional approaches to youth leadership development through 4-H and FFA. Brown and Fritz (1994) identify 35 university departments of agricultural education that currently offer traditional resident instruction courses in leadership at the undergraduate or graduate levels. “The mark of an educated person has always been the development of a broad, cosmopolitan outlook about the world,” according to Matz (1997, p. 115). One way to help develop this cosmopolitan individual is through study-abroad programs as part of the university curriculum. Study abroad has been used as a teaching tool since 1923 when the University of Delaware sent students to France to study language (McNabb, 1996). Today, by comparison, The Ohio State University's Office of International Education offers more than 100 study-abroad programs in some 40 countries and in numerous fields of study. With all of these study-abroad programs, why is a study-abroad experience important to college

graduates? The study-abroad experience provides many opportunities, among them opportunities to develop a broader perspective and a new sense of history. The well-conceived study-abroad experience that incorporates leadership components into its program offers even more — opportunities for self-discovery and insight into one's character and opportunities to develop strong leadership skills and capacities.

Matz (1997) states, “the main benefit of study abroad is an increased maturity and a broader perspective about the human condition in the world. American students are first confronted with a new sense of history” (p. 120). The fact that the United States is a young country shocks most students as they visit historical sites and museums and study the history of their host country. Other benefits cited by Matz (1997) include:

- Being shocked to learn that their foreign counterparts are much farther along in their major field of study.
- Being thrust into the role of being the resident expert on American affairs and being unprepared to debate the U.S. position on foreign policy, economics, etc.
- Coming to appreciate that other cultures are simply different rather than right or wrong when compared to the American culture.
- Being humbled by how others who are less fortunate and struggle with greater obstacles in life than most Americans are able to persevere and still prevail.

A study by Carlson, Burn, Useem, and Yachimowicz (1990) concludes that students who participate in a study-abroad program (compared to students who do not) rate their experience high regarding values such as self-discovery, critical thinking, independence, and intellectuality. The knowledge students acquire while abroad also includes the “host country's system of postsecondary education, its cultural life, its customs and traditions, its social structure, and the social issues dominant in the host country” (Carlson, et al., 1990, p. 56). Lastly, participants involved in a study-abroad program gain insight into their own character. Individuals learn their own strengths and weaknesses during this period of internal and external leadership growth. According to Welch, Cleckley, and McClure (1997), “they come to realize how much their own values are culturally based and how different cultures support different values” (p. 117).

By exploring various leadership models (Apps, 1994; Kotter, 1996; and Kouzes & Posner, 1995), it becomes apparent that several of these components (critical thinking, intellectuality, self-knowledge, and independence) are critical to developing strong leadership skills and capacities. Apps (1994) encourages individuals to examine their beliefs and values about leadership, develop a personal leadership philosophy, and become aware of their histories to know another side of themselves. Lifelong learning (willingness to seek new challenges, willingness to reflect honestly on successes and failures) and competitive drive (desire to do well, self-confidence) explain why individuals do well in their careers (Kotter, 1996). Competitive drive helps create lifelong learning, which

increases “skill and knowledge levels, especially leadership skills” (Kotter, 1996, p. 178). Finally, Kouzes and Posner (1995) find that admired leaders are broad-minded, intelligent, competent, independent, and determined. Leadership educators can use these and other leadership models to develop a study-abroad program that incorporates many leadership skill-building and capacity-building components. Here’s what one Midwestern university does and how it incorporates leadership training and development into its study-abroad program.

How One University’s Study-Abroad Program Educates Leaders

The Ohio State University leadership-focused study-abroad program is part of a larger two-year experiential leadership development program for undergraduates who have demonstrated excellence in their academic discipline. The program enables these promising students to relate their academic disciplines to current and emerging leadership issues in food, agriculture, and natural resources systems by working with identified academic and commodity leaders in their specialized profession.

During the early phase of this leadership development program, the students are engaged in two seminars centered on (a) transformational leadership and team building and (b) diversity and pluralism. These two seminars not only help prepare the students for their future careers but also for the study-abroad experience. During these two seminars, the students develop a common language for leadership, increase their understanding of individual differences, bond as a group, and learn to value and support diversity and pluralism.

During the six-week study-abroad period, the students are engaged in study, direct observation, and first-hand experience. Students explore historical, institutional, organizational, and individual leadership perspectives of a contemporary foreign society. The exploration of these perspectives helps them critically examine, reflect upon, and directly link individual leadership to organizational and societal change in America.

Through formal and informal dialogue and teaching, at the individual and organizational levels, students gain knowledge and insight into transformational leadership by sharing information and perceptions regarding leadership. Students explore, understand, and apply transformational leadership from a global perspective by:

- Studying the host country’s (Brazil) historical and social development.
- Exploring fundamental changes in Brazil’s governmental, religious, educational, and cultural institutions.
- Observing and experiencing fundamental changes in the foreign country’s industry, agriculture, social service organizations, and families.
- Experiencing (staying in host family homes) and reflecting upon both traditional culture and emerging issues facing people in Brazil, through active dialogue with current and emerging foreign leaders.

The program of study incorporates the contents specified in the syllabi for the three five-credit-hour courses, which are:

- Agricultural Economics 697: Brazil's Agricultural and Natural Resources Economy
- International Studies 697: Brazilian History, Culture, Government, and Language
- Rural Sociology 697: Brazilian Rural Development and Natural Resource Management.

The courses are taught by four Brazilian faculty members at the University of São Paulo's Escola Superior de Agricultura Luiz de Queiroz (ESALQ). The faculty members are in the Department of Economics, Administration, and Sociology. These courses are not the typical agricultural economics or rural sociology courses taught at the Midwestern university. The courses are directly linked to the real-life study of Brazil's culture, history, economics, government, education, geography, politics, agriculture, and environment. In addition to learning in the classroom, the students are able to experience first-hand how Brazil's various levels of leadership have affected and still continue to affect these crucial elements of the country's society today.

During the six-week study abroad, students attend classes from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. with a two-hour lunch break Monday through Wednesday. Thursday through Sunday, they participate in field trips. There are numerous one-day field trips, a three-day trip to São Paulo, a 10-day trip through five states, and a three-day excursion to Rio de Janeiro. During these trips students visit sites such as museums, the largest commercial farm in Brazil, a sugar mill and sugar plantation, research stations, street markets, cooperatives, multiple historical sites, various universities, cultural events, and many others.

What the Students Learned — and Valued

The students are asked to evaluate their study-abroad experience immediately after returning to the United States. Here are two specific questions the students are asked, along with individual comments from some of the students.

What are some thing(s) about this study-abroad experience that you valued and learned from?

- We learned so much about ourselves as leaders and how we approach different aspects of leadership. We learned that every person is a little different and how to respect those differences and communicate to those differences.
- The program allowed me to open my mind to whatever differences are out there.
- We learned how to communicate with people from different backgrounds, different knowledge bases, and learned how to let everyone interact within a group and work as a team while accepting everyone.

- Become more open and expand my ability to work with others. Resolving conflicts between different disciplines and thoughts is something that appeals to me — created a future possibility for me.
- This experience has helped us all realize what strengths we have as leaders and gives us more confidence to interact with others.
- I think I have learned many things on this trip and it has made me a better person. I learned more about being with people I don't know and how to deal with strange situations. If something went wrong, we had to figure out how to fix it ourselves instead of relying on someone else.
- There are some unique things about each culture you will never be able to learn or appreciate until you experience them yourself. Learning a second language is difficult, which makes communications also difficult. Study abroad makes you appreciate instead of take for granted the things you like in your own native culture.

How has your philosophy of leadership changed or been stretched because of participating in this study abroad?

- I learned a lot about leadership just by observing our group and comparing them to the Brazilians' way of operating. I probably learned more by being a silent observer than I would have by being more vocal throughout.
- I learned that as a leader, you have to be a member of the group first, and the leader second. As a leader, it is your job to keep the group together.
- Being in an unusual situation doesn't give you an excuse to be less of a person, no matter how hard it may be.
- I really learned a lot about working and living in group situations. I learned that a lot of the time you have to sit back and listen. I also learned though that sometimes you really need to step up and get a job done because if you leave it to someone else it might never be done. My philosophy has changed because I have learned that you need a good balance of the two.
- I believe this trip has built on the diversity seminar. In another culture, you have to keep an open mind in order to adapt to the culture. In addition, there are times that you have to be assertive and ask questions to gain the maximum amount of knowledge.
- I have recognized the need for extreme patience in trying times and that a good leader must step up in times of stress and disagreement rather than allow himself be taken over by emotions. In addition, I learned people are more willing to follow someone who they feel has treated them with respect and are even more willing if they consider the person a friend.

What Are the Implications for Leadership Educators?

Study abroad is a highly effective way to learn about leadership, based on student responses from the participants in The Ohio State University's leadership-focused program. Because study abroad is such an excellent teaching technique for preparing students to participate in the leadership process, this presents a challenge to leadership educators.

Whether students are high school students, undergraduates, graduate students, or adult learners, leadership educators need to create and develop quality study-abroad experiences for them. A quality experience enhances an individual's leadership skills and capacities in areas such as communication, diversity, multiculturalism, conflict management, self-awareness, group dynamics, and many others, as shown by statements from student participants. Perruci (1999) argues that "college graduates need to be prepared to succeed in an environment that calls for multicultural proficiency" (p. 61).

If educators succeed in creating this quality experience, then study abroad becomes a powerful learning opportunity. The study-abroad technique needs to include classroom teaching, experiential and interactive approaches, group dialogue, and debriefing sessions to help students learn new leadership skills and capacities. Brungardt, Gould, Moore, and Potts (1997) state it "is not so much to teach students to be leaders, but rather, prepare them to be capable of participating in the leadership process" (p. 57).

The key to a successful study-abroad program that has a leadership focus is for the leadership educator to always stay engaged and experience what the students are experiencing. This is extremely important for the debriefing sessions and group dialogues that must take place throughout the study abroad. The leadership educator must ask questions such as "What have you been noticing?" and "What have you been thinking about?" The leadership educator needs to thoughtfully encourage the students to share their observations and feelings in order to help them make connections between isolated events that may not seem connected at the time but really do have an impact upon what they are learning. It is vitally important to be ready for the teachable moments that will arise to help the students understand a situation or learn a new way of thinking.

Additionally, if the experiences a student encounters during a study abroad are to be effective in learning leadership skills, those experiences need to be based on strong communication involving the host institution, the host institution faculty members, the sponsoring university's faculty member, and the students. An unflinching flexibility and a positive relationship between both participating institutions and their respective faculty are also essential.

Leadership educators must be clear and concise when establishing guidelines for the study abroad, but they also must possess flexibility when approaching preconceived ideas such as how leadership is to be taught (formally vs. experientially). The host institution must communicate cultural and educational differences like class time (i.e., four-hour block vs. a 60- or 90-minute class), meal schedules, and communicating and staying with host families who do not speak English. At the same time, the host institution needs to understand the importance of meshing with the standards of another university.

According to Matz (1997), "The expectation of study-abroad programs is that the students will return from their time abroad not with only factual knowledge, but also with a broader outlook and with tolerance and empathy for others who are different" (p. 123). From this author's experiences and the student evaluation comments, study abroad is an excellent teaching technique for leadership educators to prepare students for participation in the leadership process, whether in their careers, their home communities, civic organizations, families, or around the world.

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