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Chad M. Gasta
Iowa State University

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Chad M. Gasta
Iowa State University

CROSS-CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE, BUSINESS PRACTICES, AND STUDENT LEARNING VIA STUDY ABROAD

In *The World Is Flat*, Thomas Friedman points out that the technology revolution has led to a world economy in which the global competitive playing field is being leveled, or, as the title of his books suggests, “flattened.” There is greater competition for what he calls “global knowledge work”—working across cultures—on a scale never before seen. Friedman goes on to say that America should be ready for this new challenge. Within this increasingly competitive global economy there is—and will naturally continue to be—an increasing obligation to attain proficiency in languages other than English, and to gain competence in intercultural issues related to commerce, politics, and society.

Study Abroad programs, especially those with substantive language and cultural training components, can be excellent tools to address these concerns. For the 2004–05 academic year, the Institute of International Education reports that 206,000 US students from colleges and universities participated in programs abroad, an 8% increase over the previous year (Appendix 1). In most cases, however, these programs were created for students in such areas as social sciences, the humanities, or business, and coursework was rarely taken in the language native to the country where the program is located (Appendix 2). In these “English-only” programs, foreign language proficiency and cultural knowledge study are often set aside so that students can focus on completing academic requirements in their primary majors. This creates an unfortunate situation whereby there are no meaningful avenues for students to achieve any foreign language proficiency at all because they focus on coursework in their principal area of study. Hence, a conflict has arisen between providing an international experience that includes foreign language proficiency and intercultural literacy at a time when students are advised to finish their degree programs in a timely fashion. This article reports the results of a two-year study that assessed undergraduate students’ understanding and awareness of socio-political, cultural, and economic issues as a result of a six-week language, culture, and business study abroad program in Spain.

Traditional models of study abroad that have emphasized second language proficiency, often created and maintained by language departments, recently

have been subject to re-examination in an effort to seek meaningful ways to combine language and culture with coursework in the different professional majors such as business, engineering, science, technology, and agriculture. This mirrors on-going research in the field of second language acquisition, which has seen a growing number of studies that emphasize alternative models of foreign language instruction, such as combining it with business (Huebner). At a recent Business Roundtable held during Ohio State University's 2007 Center for International Business and Educational Research (CIBER) language conference, recruiters from major US corporations pointed out that a significant international experience is more than a "credential"; it is now viewed as a required addition to the future employee's job portfolio. The recruiters also indicated that short-term programs and study tours—usually lasting a week or two—are no more effective than spring break vacations for landing a job. This is primarily because companies do not see, or cannot assess, the degree to which a student's short-term visit abroad demonstrates active engagement in the international experience. If recruiters cannot gauge a job applicant's international commitment, the company is less likely to invest in hiring and training an employee for an international assignment. On the other hand, recruiters point out that the more international experience(s) students have—especially if those experiences include language and culture training—the more likely they are to get the top jobs. Hence, industry leaders believe that US students must become much more internationally literate and knowledgeable about other cultures, including such areas as intercultural management, international project team management, knowledge of business practices and etiquette, and the cultural "do's and don't's" of the international marketplace. These forces have come together to foster an enormous world market demand for culturally competent professionals who are literate in more than one language and who have meaningful international experience.

As a general rule, study abroad program goals vary based on the geographic location, the primary language spoken, and the academic fields under study. Richard Brecht and A. Ronald Walton divide study abroad programs into two general categories: those that are directed at foreign language proficiency and those they call "broadly educational," which usually neither require nor offer a language component. The "broadly educational" goals include exposure to a foreign country, an increase in international appreciation, and an improved knowledge of a particular academic discipline (Brecht and Walton). On the other hand, as one can imagine, the main objective of language proficiency-based programs is the immersion in the foreign culture that yields enhanced

language skills and greater cultural understanding. Language proficiency is improved through coursework, planned activities and excursions, and, perhaps most significantly, interactions with native speakers (through host family experiences, exchanges with students at the foreign university, and daily living). In both program categories, living with a host family and in-class instruction are generally the most important integrated aspects of the program, although many of the “broadly educational” programs allow for living in apartments or residence halls with other US students. As R. Brecht, D. Davidson, and R. Ginsberg have shown, classroom learning is an extremely vital component to study abroad programs, and learners rank this experience highly in most self-assessment surveys. Outside the classroom, informal information exchanges with native speakers at local establishments (on the street, at the university, in the home) play central roles in student development by an improvement in knowledge regarding the target culture, an increase in confidence with the language under study, and improved language fluency.

According to the Institute of International Education, Spain ranks as the third most popular destination for US students studying in programs abroad. In the 2004–05 academic year, nearly 21,000 students—10% of all US students abroad—studied with programs in Spain. Until 2005, the Department of World Languages and Cultures at Iowa State University operated a program that can be categorized in the language proficiency category: a 6-week Spanish language and culture immersion experience in Alicante, Spain, for participants who had completed the second-year language sequence. In 2005 the Iowa State summer program was adapted to fit better with an innovative academic program called Languages and Cultures for Professions (LCP), a new second major option for students in the Colleges of Business and Engineering. The LCP program trains students for the global marketplace by fostering greater understanding of the professional cultural practices abroad, by improving language proficiency (especially as it relates to professional topics), and includes a meaningful experiential component, either through an international internship or study abroad. The success of this second major option created opportunities for cross-disciplinary collaborations such as study abroad with the two professional colleges at Iowa State. Indeed, the Alicante summer program was re-designed to connect business and engineering students’ need for international experience with language and culture instruction. In other words, we have been successful in making this study abroad program both “broadly educational” and “language-proficiency based” by merging language and culture study with coursework in business and engineering.

This distinctive approach yielded the largest study abroad program in Iowa State's history: for summers 2005 and 2006, 169 students participated, and another 83 participated in 2007.¹

From the outset, the summer program was redesigned and adapted to incorporate a variety of language, cultural, and business experiences. For language learning, students studied Spanish in at least three settings. First, they were required to enroll in at least one Spanish course determined by their existing knowledge of Spanish, previous courses taken, or a placement exam. This arrangement necessitated the development of intensive first- and second-year courses for those students with limited or no prior Spanish background. For the second course, students choose another Spanish course, or opt for one of the newly developed courses in business and engineering (see below). Second, all students lived with non-English-speaking Spanish host families, thus requiring on a daily basis a greater need for language communication within their living environment. Finally, students spoke Spanish as part of their daily lives, at the university, on the street, or while traveling. The arrangement also required students to learn new cultural aspects of living abroad, such as using the local and national transportation systems, experiencing the routine of daily living in Spain, and shopping and sightseeing, among many other opportunities. Students also learned about Spanish culture through organized program activities such as guided excursions to historic locations, and participation in university-sponsored events such as dance and cooking classes taught in the target language.

The most significant development in this three-way collaboration was the inclusion of two business courses taught in English by an Iowa State College of Business faculty member: a Management course taught under the title Entrepreneurship in Spain and the European Union and a Business Administration course entitled Business in Spain and the European Union. Both courses are required for majors in several business programs, and engineering students obtain credit for the courses in their college. The two courses shared many of the same components and, at times, were offered concurrently, in order to take advantage of planned field visits. For the shared portions, the course component offered three divisions. First, students attended lectures on (1) core entrepreneurship topics and (2) entrepreneurship issues related to Spain and

¹ Starting in 2007 the program took place in Valencia, Spain, in order to take advantage of greater cultural offerings, more significant business and industry contacts, and a university that allows us to continue developing the program. Nonetheless, the basic structure and amenities of the program remain the same.

the European Union (e.g., entrepreneurship in Spain, marketing in Spain, small business start-up and ownership in Spain, social entrepreneurship). Next, the course offered field visits to small Spanish firms that permitted the students to study business operations first-hand, talk directly with owners, and make pertinent observations and analyses about the differences between conducting business abroad as contrasted with the US context. Finally, students undertook independent projects that required exploration and observation of small business activity in the Alicante community, followed by reports that compared their findings of small Spanish companies to those in the US.

The initial reason for the three-College collaboration was in response to the new Languages and Cultures for Professions secondary major option for students in business or engineering. However, there was a second reason for the program structure, one that was related to market demand. An unpublished 2005 survey of Iowa businesses, the Iowa International Business Survey, conducted by the National Foreign Language Resource Center (NFLRC) at Iowa State University in collaboration with the Iowa World Language Association, revealed that Iowa companies seek employees with language proficiency and international competence. In the survey, employers were asked such questions as the language they most use in conducting business, languages that they wish their employees could use, and actual employee language and culture skills. In all cases, the findings demonstrated that Iowa companies are hard-pressed to find workers with suitable language and cultural competence. They report that they would like for their employees to have acquired at least a basic proficiency in a second language and a more profound understanding of foreign cultures and cross-cultural differences as used in business practices, all of which should have been acquired in high school or at the university level. The results of the survey of 66 Iowa businesses report that. . .

1. the company's overall revenue would increase, somewhat or to a great extent, with more proficiency in foreign languages (82%).
2. their employees should have an appreciation of cross-cultural differences (68%).
3. their employees need foreign language skills to conduct business (67%).
4. an understanding of foreign markets and business practices is important to very important (64%).
5. an understanding of technical or scientific language is important to very important (40%).

However, 46% of these same companies also reported that finding employees with these characteristics and skills has been difficult. What is most startling is that 82% believed that the lack of these skills has had a negative impact on company revenue. In other words, Iowa businesses believe they are losing money because employees are deficient in required language and culture skills.

Little research has been carried out that examines study abroad programs that integrate professional areas with a required language and culture component. However, available research indicates that language and culture study offered with professional instruction in areas such as business or engineering provide the basis for understanding cultural, social, political, and economic issues that are so important to the global marketplace. According to Vija Mendelson, multidisciplinary programs lead students to experience emotional changes such as: “increased independence, self-sufficiency, maturity, and willingness to think with an open mind” (50–51). The resulting newly formed sense of individual independence contributes not only to improved communication skills and a heightened awareness of the culture, but also to one’s comfort in a foreign setting. This might include the willingness to take risks and, eventually, open a business, to work abroad, or try some other professional activity that had not been considered previously.

One of the most significant studies that examined business students was conducted by Tammy Orahood, Larisa Kruze, and Denise Pearson. It examined business students’ professional goals and reveals much about the impact of study abroad on their careers. The authors surveyed 198 junior and senior level business students at Indiana University, 83 of whom had studied abroad at some point in their undergraduate careers. They found that 96% of students who studied abroad indicated that the experience impacted their future career plans, 94% listed the experience on resumes, and 79% had specific questions or conversations concerning their experience during job interviews. What is perhaps most significant is that 82% expressed an interest in working abroad and 58% were actively marketing themselves for an international career. By way of comparison, the authors point out that only 51% of non-study-abroad students held any international interests at all. These statistics indicate that study abroad fosters appreciation for internationalization, an interest in working in a global context, and a desire to improve language and cultural competence. The study also suggests that students must have a meaningful international experience if they are to be successful in marketing themselves for employment in the global workforce.

Hence, to be successful professionals in the global economy, American students must be culturally literate and aware and, most importantly, they must have meaningful international experience(s). The Iowa State summer program was designed with these aims in mind. Indeed, we wanted to not only introduce students to a variety of business, language, and cultural experiences that would prepare them for the international marketplace, but to do so within the international context itself. By exposing students to a new, perhaps radical, set of experiences, we set out to effect change in their perceptions and impact how they viewed their abilities and future opportunities. These objectives are consistent with V. Suutari, who found that international experiences can change career orientations.

Over a two-year timeframe, we designed and conducted extensive surveys to gauge student perceptions of their own learning, and to determine the extent to which their perceptions and knowledge of social, cultural, and economic issues changed throughout their 6-week immersion. The first survey was an overall evaluation of the study abroad program in such areas as satisfaction with families, excursions, courses and instructors, and pre-departure orientations. A 5-point Likert scale was used with “1” being the lowest and “5” being the highest. Of the 169 students participating in the program (2005 and 2006), 139 completed the survey (82%). The most interesting results deal with language proficiency and cultural awareness. At the beginning of the program 22% (25 students) rated their language proficiency as either “good” or “excellent,” and the figure increased to 45% (76 students) at end of the program. This is an amazing transformation, since many students in the program enrolled in the beginning and intermediate intensive Spanish classes and started with little or no previous Spanish. But, this increase in ability is not out of the ordinary, as Freed maintains, since “the greatest gains in an immersion environment are made by students with initially lower language proficiency” (1998).

Students were also asked to rate their interests and receptiveness to issues related to ethnicity, culture, politics, and openness and adaptability (Table 1).

TABLE 1
OVERALL PROGRAM EVALUATION

As a result of my study abroad experience. . .	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Mean
I am more receptive to different ideas	1	0	11	39	88	4.53
I have gained better insight into myself	1	2	14	50	72	4.37
I have a greater sense of self-confidence due to living abroad	2	1	11	43	82	4.45
My interest in social issues has increased	4	2	22	50	61	4.17
My interest in world events has increased	3	5	13	49	68	4.26
My interest in the arts has increased	8	13	26	60	31	3.67
My tolerance of other people and customs has increased	4	13	16	49	57	4.02
I understand the US better	6	7	31	63	32	3.78
My ability to adapt to new situations has increased	0	5	6	44	84	4.49
n=139/169 (82%)						

The results illustrate that students' own perceptions of themselves change dramatically as a result of the immersion experience. Briefly stated, the study abroad immersion experience effects positive change: students believe that they are more receptive to others (4.53/5.0), have achieved greater self-confidence (4.45/5.0), have become more tolerant of other cultures (4.02/5.0), have learned to adapt to challenging, new situations (4.49/5.0), and they are more interested in world events (4.26/5.0) and social issues (4.17/5.0).²

The second survey was administered twice—before the program started and again after it ended—to see how students' perceptions and knowledge changed over the six-week period. The first section of the survey collected demographic information about the student, including age, major, sex, etc. The next section asked students to rank their understanding of different aspects of life in Spain (Table 2). For this survey a 7-point Likert scale was used with “1” being the lowest and “7” being the highest.³ Questions in this survey were categorized in the following fashion: (1) cultural aspects of life in Spain; (2) social and political aspects of Spain; (3) understanding of business in Spain and the European Union. The survey questions were divided along the lines of “knowledge of” or “perception about” various aspects. Since there are no clear answers for issues related to cultural topics such as family, art, or pastimes, we considered only students' perceptions about these issues. During the two-year cycle, 90 of 169 students (53%) completed this pre- and post-survey. As is fairly typical for a summer program, only seventeen students were Spanish majors (18.88% of those reporting), thirty-four were Spanish minors (37.77%), and thirty-nine of the students were business or engineering majors (43.33%). The pre- and post-surveys were designed to measure the change in perception or knowledge over the six-week period to determine if students' understanding of socio-political and cultural topics was changing and, if so, to what extent?

² Some students may not perceive much of a change in tolerance because they already consider themselves open to other viewpoints and ideas as a result of their family upbringing, university training, their community involvement, or because they traveled abroad prior to this program.

³ The 7-point scale provided a more specific measurement than the 5-point scale. It also was necessary for the logit regression analyses conducted of these statistics for a separate study on entrepreneurship and study abroad entitled “A Culture-Based Entrepreneurship Program: Impact on Student Interest in Business Ownership,” by Gasta, Domínguez, L'Hote, and Van Auken.

TABLE 2

PRE- AND POST-SURVEYS OF STUDENT KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTION OF CULTURAL, SOCIO-POLITICAL, AND ECONOMIC ISSUES RELATED TO SPAIN AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

n=90/169 (53%)	MEAN BEFORE	MEAN AFTER	CHANGE
Cultural: My perception of			
Popular Music and Musicians in Spain	3.056	5.156	2.100
Everyday Dress in Spain	3.622	5.500	1.878
Festivals and Pastimes in Spain	4.000	5.767	1.767
Popular Film in Spain	2.589	4.300	1.711
Local Customs and Habits	3.878	5.478	1.600
Issues Related To Young People in Spain.	3.567	5.156	1.589
Attitudes Held in Spain Regarding US Foreign Policy	2.867	4.444	1.577
Spanish Families	4.278	5.600	1.322
Everyday Religious Practices in Spain	3.178	4.280	1.102
Social and Political: My knowledge of			
Current Affairs in Spain	2.800	4.844	2.044
Issues Related to Immigration in Spain and the EU	2.578	4.622	2.044
Spain's Political System and Government	2.744	4.689	1.945
Issues Related to Women and Minorities in Spain	2.644	4.589	1.945
Issues Related to Poverty in Spain	2.367	4.289	1.922
Issues Related to the Environment in Spain	2.667	4.422	1.755
Spain's Legal System	2.233	3.867	1.634
US Foreign Policy as It Relates to Spain	2.622	4.144	1.522
Terrorism in Spain	3.256	4.511	1.255

TABLE 2 (CONT.)

n=90/169 (53%)	MEAN BEFORE	MEAN AFTER	CHANGE
Economic: My knowledge of			
How Individual Companies Operate on a Day-to-Day Basis in Spain or the EU	2.200	4.544	2.344
The Reputation of US Products and Companies in Spain or the EU	2.300	4.467	2.167
How Companies in Spain or Europe are Organized	2.189	4.211	2.022
Spain's Economic System	2.789	4.744	1.955
Leading Companies in Spain or Europe	2.387	4.333	1.946
General Policies and Procedures in Spanish or EU Companies	2.144	4.011	1.867
Protocols Pertaining to Employers and Employees in Spain or the EU	1.978	3.798	1.820
US Companies That Market Their Products and/or Have Operations in Spain or the EU	2.622	4.356	1.734
How Negotiation and Exchange Takes Place in Spain or the EU	2.167	3.889	1.722
Laws and Regulations Governing the Economic System in Spain or the EU	2.211	3.811	1.600
Spanish or European Trade Agreements	2.244	3.644	1.400
Spanish or European Banking Systems	2.322	3.556	1.234
Spanish or European Stock Markets	2.078	3.222	1.144

Likert Scale: 1=None; 2=Very Poor; 3=Poor; 4=Fair; 5=Good; 6=Very Good; 7=Excellent

What became immediately apparent from the survey data is how greatly students' perception and/or knowledge increased in a relatively short expanse of time. In the cultural area, for example, we see increases similar to those found in the previous survey in Table 1: understanding of Spanish families, habits, and customs; everyday social and religious practices; and popular culture (positive mean changes ranging from 1.102 to 2.100). With respect to social and political areas, students expressed an increased awareness of issues related to politics, poverty, the environment, current political affairs, and foreign policy (positive mean changes from 1.255 to 2.044). The largest overall gains—though not in overall knowledge—took place in the business category (positive mean changes from 1.144 to 2.344): students indicated a greater awareness of markets, trade agreements, daily operations and procedures, policies, and products. Students also pointed to better comprehension of how US companies and US products are viewed in Spain. Much of these gains were due to the large number of students who enrolled in one of the business courses that included the tours of local factories, offices, and other Spanish businesses.

It is satisfying to see key advances made by students. However, it quickly became apparent that the survey results also provide us with far more ominous warnings. We need to consider how little students feel they know about the issues raised in the three categories *before* participating in the program. For example, students freely admit their knowledge of international business and business practices to be either “none” or “very poor” before participating in the experience, which improved to “fair” at the end. Their knowledge of social and political issues was equally bad, as they acknowledged it to be “very poor” but improving to “fair” at the end. The greatest improvement over time is in the area of cultural perception where students identify understanding as “poor” or “fair” at the beginning, then “good” upon completing the program. There are, of course, good reasons for some of these findings: as stated previously, summer programs tend to attract a large number of degree minors (in this case, 34 students, or nearly 38% of those responding to the survey) who have had few or no courses at the third-year level—the point at which students typically take content courses in culture. In other words, students minoring in Spanish might take a first content course abroad, underscoring their unfamiliarity with Spain beforehand. Moreover, 39 of the students answering the survey (43%) were business or engineering majors who had never previously studied Spanish or Spanish culture. Therefore, overall, 73 students (81.1%) had few courses related to Spain and, thus, limited knowledge about this country's cultural, social, political or economic systems. It was our expectation that

despite the fact that most students would have limited exposure to Spanish culture before participating in the program, the study abroad experience nonetheless would foster an appreciation for living and studying abroad, and increase their knowledge about the target country.

What is very clear is that we have a long way to go in educating students about sociocultural and economic issues that will directly impact their own careers and the future commercial viability of the US. We are making advances, as these surveys suggest, but they are slow in coming. Students interested in the international marketplace, and who wish to study abroad, must take coursework in the languages and cultures of the country they plan to visit, and they must begin their language study sooner. Moreover, if the survey results reported here demonstrate that students are beginning programs abroad with little understanding of the host country and its cultural practices, and they show only small improvement despite language and cultural training while there, we can imagine what is happening on other programs that do not include courses in the languages and cultures of the host country. Although data measuring similar student gains for “English Only” programs is not readily available, it seems quite plausible that future research would demonstrate that student learning in the areas examined here would be much poorer. Therefore, universities must find ways to integrate language and cultural training into other academic disciplines, especially when it is a part of a study abroad program. What research shows, and what we can discern from the results provided in this study, is that study abroad is one area that does open the doors to a greater awareness of the cross-cultural context within which business takes place. By participating in a program abroad that includes meaningful exposure to language and culture, students will exhibit greater self-confidence, be better prepared to handle and adapt to difficult situations, demonstrate improved cultural sensitivity, and be prepared to enter the global marketplace. These characteristics make students more competitive candidates for the best employment opportunities.⁴

⁴ The author wishes to acknowledge Leland L’Hote, Julia Domínguez, and Howard Van Auken for their dedication and extraordinary work on the design, development, and direction of the Iowa State summer program in Spain.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

TOTAL NUMBER OF US STUDENTS STUDYING ABROAD
FOR THE ACADEMIC YEARS 2003/2004 AND 2004/2005
AND TOP 10 LEADING DESTINATIONS

Rank	Destination	2003/2004	2004/2005	2004/2005 % of Total	% Change
1	United Kingdom	32,237	32,071	15.6	-0.5
2	Italy	21,922	24,858	12.1	13.4
3	Spain	20,080	20,806	10.1	3.6
4	France	13,718	15,374	7.5	12.4
5	Australia	11,418	10,813	5.2	-5.3
6	Mexico	9,293	9,244	4.5	-0.5
7	Germany	5,985	6,557	3.2	9.6
8	China	4,737	6,389	3.1	34.9
9	Ireland	5,198	5,083	2.5	-2.2
10	Costa Rica	4,510	4,887	2.4	8.4
	Total	191,321	205,983	-	7.7

Institute of International Education, *Open Doors Report 2006*

APPENDIX 2

LEADING FIELDS OF STUDY FOR US STUDENTS STUDYING ABROAD
FOR THE ACADEMIC YEARS 2003/2004 AND 2004/2005

Field of Study	2003/2004 Total	2003/2004 %	2004/2005 Total	2004/2005 %	% Change
Social Sciences	43,258	22.6	46,552	22.6	7.6
Business & Mgm't	33,473	17.5	36,047	17.5	7.7
Humanities	25,401	13.3	27,396	13.3	7.9
Other Disciplines	15,010	7.8	16,067	7.8	7.0
Fine or Applied Arts	14,493	7.6	15,655	7.6	8.0
Foreign Languages	14,340	7.5	15,449	7.5	7.7
Physical Sciences	13,509	7.1	14,625	7.1	8.3
Education	7,918	4.1	8,445	4.1	6.7
Health Sciences	6,467	3.4	7,003	3.4	8.5
Undeclared	6,457	3.4	7,003	2.9	9.4
Math or Comp. Sci.	3,263	1.7	3,502	1.7	7.3
Agriculture	2,269	1.2	2,472	1.2	8.9
Total	191,321	100.0	205,983	100.0	7.7

Institute of International Education, *Open Doors Report 2006*

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