

## Student Engagement & Study Abroad: Discoveries in Existing Institutional Data

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International education administrators are frequently in the position of advocating for increased attention to study abroad with anecdotal evidence and comparative statistics. Have we increased study abroad participation during our tenure? How much? At what cost? How do we compare with peer institutions? Our time is consumed with administering offices, programs, and budgets; while simultaneously advising students, managing crises abroad, conducting site visits and supporting faculty initiatives.

Boards of trustees, Presidents, administrators, faculty, students, and parents however, are increasingly asking for evidence of the value of study abroad. It is an expensive line item in undergraduate education from an institutional perspective as well as from the student and parental perspective. They want to know about what our students learn while they study abroad. Are there specific academic skills we know will likely be enhanced? What about co-curricular benefits, such as increased independence, or self-esteem? Are students who study abroad more likely to take what they have learned in one context and apply it in another? Are they more likely to get good paying jobs? Are they safe and happy while abroad? What could be done to improve their experience? While we want to find ways to answer questions like this and collect data about the value of the services and programs provided to students, it can be challenging to find the time to evaluate the benefits that accrue to students who partake in our programs systematically. One place to begin to take a closer look at our programs is with the institutional data already available on campus.

Campuses often maintain collect, analyze, compare, and report consistent data elements, creating longitudinal databases. Offices of institutional research and /or assessment frequently have additional data from national surveys (e.g. the Cooperative Institutional Research Program Freshman Survey, National Survey of Student Engagement, College Student Survey, and College Students Experiences Questionnaire) that may be relevant for specific constituencies on campus to help them engage in evidence-based decision-making and strategic planning.

Agnes Scott College (ASC) has taken part in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) for several years and it has been a rich data source for international education. The NSSE is a nationally normed survey designed to help institutions better understand the effective teaching and learning activities occurring on their campus, and suggest which programs and activities foster student engagement. The NSSE asks students about how they spend their time, what they feel they have gained from their college experience, and their assessment of how their interactions with classmates and faculty. By comparing seniors who self-reported international education experiences with those who did not we hoped to gain a better understanding of the benefits of international programs to students.

The NSSE data yielded several interesting findings. The first was that the students who studied abroad reported more involvement in the Agnes Scott community (Tables One and Two). This was most apparent in their relationship with faculty, with seniors who studied abroad significantly more likely to have discussed ideas from readings with faculty, discussed grades or assignments with faculty, used email to communicate with a faculty member, and talked about career plans

with a faculty member than those seniors who did not study abroad. This finding of greater involvement also extended to their relationships with peers, with seniors who studied abroad significantly more likely to report they tutored or taught other students (paid or unpaid) and discussed ideas from their readings with others outside of class than those who did not study abroad. Lastly, seniors who studied abroad were significantly more likely to have attended an art exhibit, gallery, play, dance or other theatre performance, participated in activities to enhance their spirituality, and participated in a learning community or some other formal program.

Taken together with the results showing no such differences emerged when comparing first year students who showed interest in study abroad and those that did not, and, the picture that starts to emerge is that one of the benefits associated with study abroad is a willingness to engage with faculty, peers, and community activities, which we believe contributes to a deeper, more meaningful college experience.

Table One

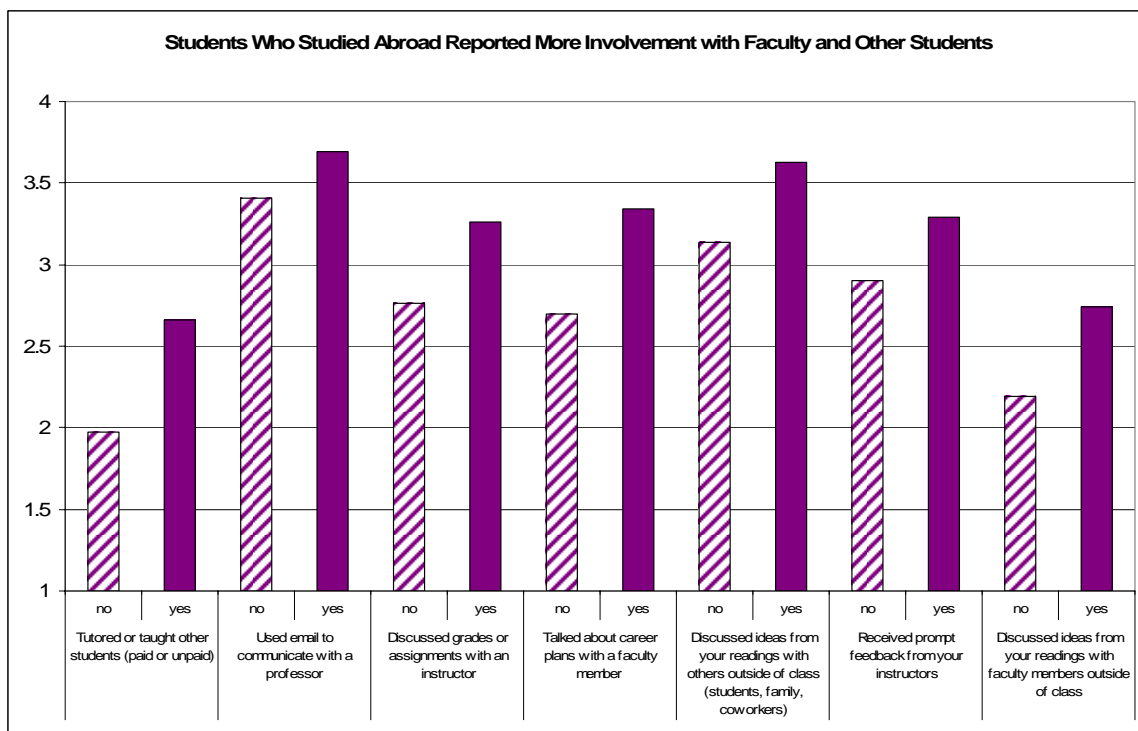
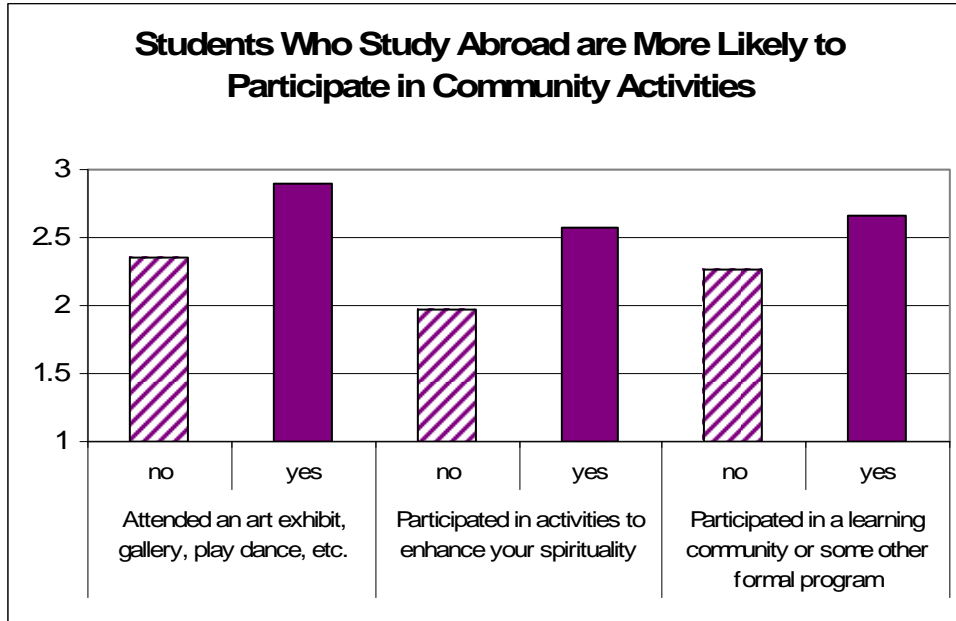
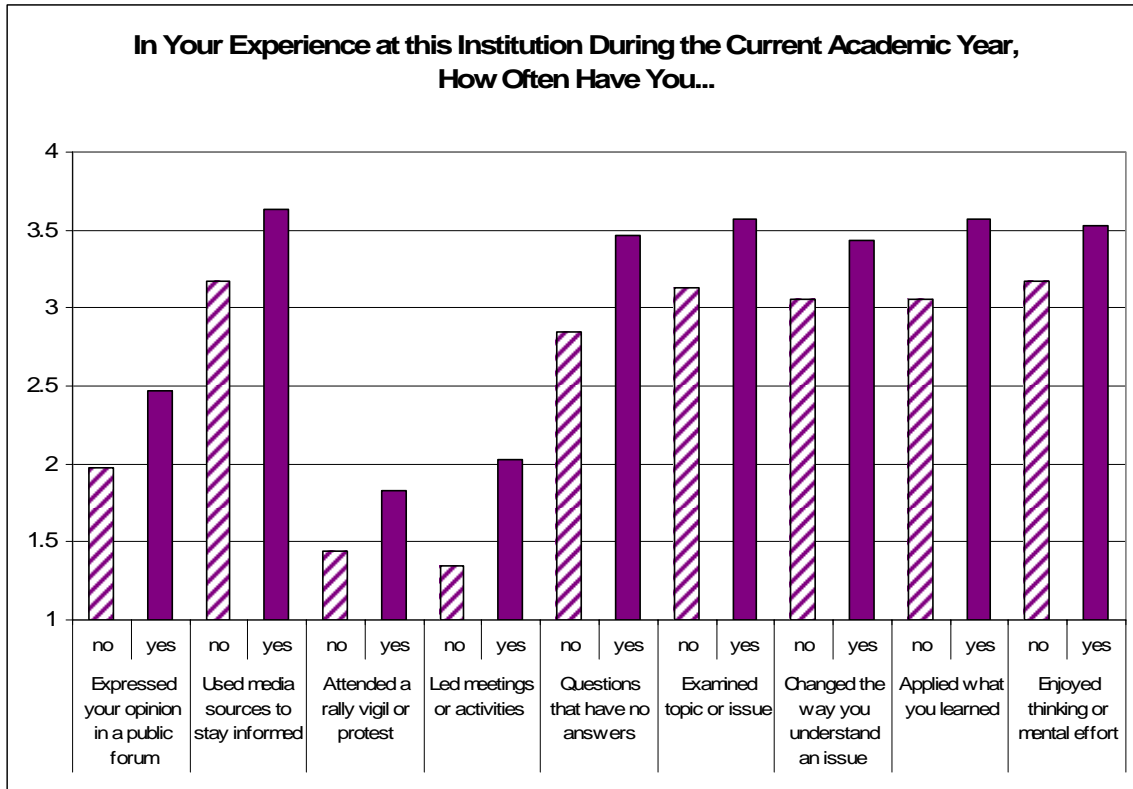


Table Two



The NSSE survey permits institutions to ask local items of importance to them, and Agnes Scott has asked about a specific set of learning outcomes. The results of this section indicate many significant differences between seniors who studied abroad and those who did not (Table Three). Of particular importance to study abroad were the findings that suggest that seniors who studied abroad were significantly more likely to report that they had: Learned something from discussing questions that have no clear answers, Examined strengths and weaknesses of your own views on a topic or issue, Learned something that changed the way you understand an issue or concept, Applied what you learned in a course to life or work, and Enjoyed completing a task that required a lot of thinking or mental effort. These are several of the learning outcomes that study abroad is believed to foster, and now we had empirical evidence that our seniors who studied abroad do in fact manifest those learning outcomes to a greater extent than those who did not.

Table Three



As a result of having the comparative NSSE data in hand, we were able to put it to use in a variety of situations. Four examples will illustrate the utility of looking at institutional data in new ways. This reworked data is then ready whether for advocacy, information sharing, programmatic change or evidence based decision-making.

The first opportunity to use the data on campus occurred when the number of students seeking pre-approval for study abroad exceeded what was allocated in the preliminary institutional budget. We had evidence suggesting students who studied abroad evaluated their educational experience at ASC significantly higher than those who did not study abroad. It was possible to bring this data to bear on the immediate issue of a budgetary shortfall. We are not suggesting that the data was the deciding factor in budget decisions, but rather that it was a contributing factor in the decision making process.

Agnes Scott College was engaged in a Presidential search this past spring and the three faculty members of the search committee, requested faculty submit issues and questions of concern to be incorporated in the final stages of the interview process. Knowing the candidates' commitment to and experience in international educational exchange was critical to our future operations. We were able to frame our questions around data we knew we had, and talk convincingly about the strengths of our programs, linking them to the mission of the college, and to the college's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). All three search committee members assured us international was of great importance in the selection process and commented on the usefulness of the data.

In addition, the data has been used for programmatic attention and change. One of the most interesting issues to arise out of our data was the difference in the educational level of the

mothers for students who studied abroad compared with those who did not. Female students who studied abroad were much more likely to have a mother with a Bachelor's degree or higher, while those who had not studied abroad had mothers with an educational attainment of less than a Bachelor's degree.

If this difference holds up in future administrations of the survey, then it makes sense to start thinking about ways to offer extra encouragement, outreach, and programming would be for women whose mothers did not attain a Bachelor's degree or higher. This invisible difference (mother's educational attainment) could be gleaned from admissions profiles and then shared with the study abroad office in order to provide targeted communications or programs. Perhaps students' whose mothers do not have a college diploma cannot imagine international travel and study abroad. It is also possible that they actively discourage international travel for any number of reasons and the international education office could be prepared with information designed to counteract unwarranted fears.

Our findings also were incorporated into a session on the importance of study abroad assessment at the Georgia Association of International Educators conference. Of interest to our counterparts at the session was how this same comparison among seniors might play out at co-ed institutions. Do male and female student differ equally based on mothers educational level? What of the father's educational level?

The knowledge we have gained from in-depth examination of the NSSE data have enabled us to be both proactive and reactive. We are able to respond to inquiries about study abroad using data as evidence of the value of our students' international experiences. Opportunities to advocate for the benefits of study abroad are frequent in the campus environment. Some can be anticipated while other are immediate and offer little time to prepare. Having this data ready for discussion and decisions is valuable.

Most institutions have an office of institutional research, an office of assessment, or at minimum a person responsible for institutional data collection. What assessment instruments are administered routinely to students? What do each of these surveys or instruments measure? Is it appropriate to compare results from these particular assessment tools in terms of students who studied abroad and students who did not? Results of such initiatives to seek data can be quite beneficial in the world of our work – this data can be used as powerful evidence in discussions and decision making – whether about institutional practices, programs, policy or funding.

We found that there are benefits of looking at data that already exists in new ways rather than creating more and different surveys. So our charge to the reader is obvious at this point. Data is available on your campus now! Go out, get it and start using it!