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STUDY ABROAD AND ITS IMPACT ON DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP SKILLS: AN
UNDERGRADUATE'S ANALYSIS

By

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A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

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ABSTRACT

With the growing emphasis on a need to develop adept leaders who can tackle new 21st century problems, researchers have been looking at ways to integrate methods of developing leadership skills into a student's academic experience. The idea behind integrating leadership into academic experience is that the earlier exposure will give students an extra push when it comes to leadership development. One resource that has been available to students who seek to enrich their cultural immersion and develop beneficial skills for their future is study abroad. The central research question will be on how does studying abroad affect the development of leadership competencies, and how those skills can be translated into a modern context, in an undergraduate student? Results will be measured through three set of competencies that each have two associated skills, cognitive competencies using decision-making and problem solving, intrapersonal competencies using flexibility and confidence, and interpersonal competencies using teamwork and communication. The purpose of this study will be to see how studying abroad factors into the development of these competencies by introducing literature on both study abroad and the importance of these competencies, and subsequent skills, in the development of leadership skills to reflect how they build upon the undergraduate experience. The literature will be supplemented with the personal study abroad experiences of an undergraduate student as a means of applying the literature. Through this paper, the goal is to encourage undergraduates to consider study abroad as a program that has benefits which continue well beyond the return home. As well as encourage discussion and research into the effects of studying abroad upon undergraduate students.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introduction

In the consideration of our rapidly changing modern world, we must look to develop leaders who can address our increasingly complex problems. To accomplish this task, the next generation of leaders must have some semblance of global competency to have the skills and experience necessary to brainstorm these new solutions. Solving our increasingly complex problems require globally-minded leaders who are able to contribute their own unique experiences. (Marsella, 2009) However, to be able to leverage unique experiences, one must experience them first. One resource that has been credited with having a positive impact on the development of competency in global leadership is studying abroad, as a medium for leadership development amongst undergraduate students. (Montgomery & Arensdorf, 2012) Within the context of this research, leadership can be defined as having the competency and capacity to define and successful enact goals. The purpose of conducting this research is to better understand the effects that experience abroad has on developing leadership skills that are growing increasingly vital in the workplace of the 21st century. The central research question will be looking at how does studying abroad affect the development of leadership competencies, and how those skills can be translated into a modern context, in an undergraduate student?

Significance and Tradeoffs

For this paper, the term study abroad will be used as a blanket that will encompass both going abroad as part of an academic institution and going abroad as part of a program, internship, research, etc. The practice of developing leadership is one that leadership scholars have advocated for its introduction into a younger audience. (Stephenson, 2011) One of the reasonings is that one cannot make a good leader by telling someone how to lead, a good leader can arguable be made by helping the individual develop confidence and comfortability within their style of leadership.

(Klimoski & Amos, 2012) Thus, this paper will attempt to progress the discussion upon studying abroad, as a resource for students to gain the experience and exposure necessary to develop a sense of leadership. Although this is beyond the recourse of this paper, it is hopeful that the experiences presented in this paper can be used as motivation for young leaders to become more involved with their community. (Pless & Maak, 2011) This research will also aim to shed light upon individual takeaways from studying abroad, to provide more examples of the benefits of studying abroad towards becoming a more competitive individual.

However, in talking about the significance of study abroad, it should also be mentioned that study abroad is an option that has tradeoffs. The largest ones being the cost and time commitment. Study abroad is not cheap and although scholarships exist, a good number of students will have to foot the entire bill. The benefit of study abroad also takes time and effort. How much an individual gets out of their study abroad program will depend on them and what they choose to spend their time on. A student who spends more time in their apartment will benefit a lot less than another student who is willing to walk around and explore their unknown surroundings. This means that there is a lot of variance and uncertainty when it comes to study abroad, as the experience will be unique to the student. However, this paper presents the argument that study abroad is a worthwhile investment for developing valuable leadership skills, all be it through the lens of one undergraduate student.

Background Literature

The field of studying the correlations and corresponding effects of studying abroad and its impacts on leadership has been relatively niche because in the past, study abroad has not been widely popular. This shows in the literature, which has primarily focused on the undergraduate

level due to researchers wanting to prioritize the development of the future generation and with researchers not currently having much long-term data. However, research within the undergraduate level has shown mostly positive results with one study concluding that going abroad has been visibly shown to increase the willingness of the participants to take up leadership roles. (Min & Yun, 2017) In another study, participants reported that as a result of their time abroad, they were more willing to become more involved and take up volunteer initiatives within their community. (Horn & Fry, 2013) Another study, found that students tended to become more civically minded after gaining exposure to influences abroad and were more willing to better their community. (Cole & Zhou, 2014) All this research is done because there has been the increased recognition that exercising effective leadership requires global competency, with those who have more global exposure having some correlation to having capable leadership mentalities. (Rosch & Haber-Curran, 2013) The majority of research done across this field thus far has been done through group study, with researchers looking at students/individuals as part of a group and interviewing their individual experiences as part of a collective. Thus, further research into this field should also be taken to look at individual experiences, less as part of a team and more at how the individual is affected. A challenge with studying any depicted benefit of study abroad, in association with leadership, has been that every individual can vary heavily with each experience. With the goal for individuals research being to discover how students can utilize the experiences they gain abroad as the foundations for developing more transformative leadership. Transformative leadership referring to the notion of self-authorship, in which every individual has an internal voice that guides them to their unique style of leadership. (Cohen et al., 2013)

Research Methodology

For the purposes of this research, analysis was done on six metrics of leadership taken from an IIE Study on the impact that studying abroad has on soft and hard workplace leadership skills. The study was conducted through a series of surveys that were directed at undergraduate students across multiple US college campuses, with a participation ratio of 79 percent female, 20 percent male, and 1 percent other gender identity. The study identified three domains, cognitive competencies, intrapersonal competencies, and interpersonal competencies, in which all the leadership skills discussed in this paper fall under. Out of each of these three domains, two skills were selected to analyze. Cognitive competencies encompass skills that require a cognitive process, strategies, and knowledge and creativity. Intrapersonal competencies refer to skills that require intellectual openness and positive self-evaluation. Interpersonal competencies refer to skills that encompass group collaboration and interaction. Decision-making and problem solving were chosen from cognitive competencies, flexibility and confidence were chosen from intrapersonal competencies, and teamwork and communication were chosen from interpersonal competencies. These mixture of skills were chosen because research has proven these skills to be among those essential to that of a successful leader in a 21st century workplace. (Farrugia & Sanger, 2017) The analysis within this paper will focus on how exactly each of these skills relate to the workplace by first looking at literature to each of these leadership skills to set up the context for the inclusion and discussion of personal experiences and then connecting a study abroad context by using the first-hand experience of the researcher who has studied abroad on four different programs to the United Kingdom, Greece, Italy, and Australia.

#1 – Decision-Making

At the very core of leadership discussion is decision-making. Everything a leader does ultimately revolves around what decisions are decided upon and executed. For the purposes of this study, decision-making can be defined as the ability to make choices by identifying a choice, gathering information, and assessing the best alternative resolutions. (Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992) This definition was chosen because it outlines a process by which an individual would form a carefully planned decision, with the goal being to focus on bigger decisions that have noticeable consequences. In looking at the value of decision-making, we must take a brief look at the factors that go into making a decision. The first factor is the person making the decision. Whoever ends up making the decision determines what they must consider, for example when a decision is being made by a political leader who must consider the overarching view of what is this person like or how does this person view the world and interact with others. While a decision made that will only affect a singular group, more individual politics is taken into consideration such as will this person follow through with the choice or if they share my views. (Hermann & Hagan, 1998) The second thing is to look at what that person is making their decision based off. People tend to rely on heuristics, such as anchoring, as a mental shortcut to navigate them through their decisions by utilizing something they are familiar with. This usage of heuristics is why study abroad is so important as a means of cultivating good decision-making. This is because a large part of the hinderance in good decision-making comes from relying too much on cognitive anchors and trying to justify decisions based on past choices. (Dean & Sharfman, 1996)

Before going to Greece, I was so reluctant to go far when it came to finding opportunities. This impacted my decision-making because I would only consider professional development opportunities if they were within really close by to my home., simply because my home was my

cognitive anchor for how I perceived my life. However, after returning from my study abroad trip to Greece, I realized that distance began to matter a lot less. Almost suddenly, the world began to open up and I realized I have a lot more to gain from not relying heavily on my anchors. Studying abroad was what led me to investigate opportunities for an international internship, being my internship in Australia which I got the next year.

As developing leaders going into the workforce, it is very easy to believe that we have all tools we need within us. However, as our developed economy moves towards chasing innovation and creativity, the leader who can make informed decisions that are not hindered by cognitive anchors will both have access to a larger plethora of opportunities and experience a greater level of success. (Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992) Seizing opportunities is about making decisions, which creates tradeoffs. A closer workplace might be more convenient, but it might also limit our potential to grow. In having good decision-making skills, one must always be willing to take every bit of usable information into consideration. Usable information is something that can come from anywhere, but it is a decision whether we choose to look for that information.

#2 – Problem Solving

Problem solving is a skill that can make or break a good leader because problem solving is typically done under pressure and whether a solution is created reflects the individual themself. For this paper, problem solving can be defined as the ability to identify problems, analyze problems in a systematic but timely manner; draw correct and realistic conclusions; and determine new preventative measures before moving to solutions. (Farrugia & Sanger, 2017) This definition was chosen for problem solving because it reflects a methodical process by which someone can analyze a situation and devise a solution. The first step in problem solving, identifying the problem,

requires the awareness that there is a problem in the first place. This awareness can be difficult because it is hard to teach someone an adequate understanding of how to recognize something as being a problem. (Morton & Grace, 1988) Something that might seem trivial to someone, might mean the world to someone else. The second step, analyzing the problem in a timely manner requires an understanding of what the problem entails. This means understanding what is going wrong and what is causing this wrong. The third step is to build upon the discoveries made during the second step and brainstorm solutions. The three important factors about step three are that the solution must be realistic, a second solution should be developed just in case something bad happens, and work diligently to execute the solution. (Morton & Grace, 1988) Implementation is a part that is just as important as the brainstorming because an idea is worthless if it cannot be executed properly. Finally, the fourth step is to make sure this problem does not get repeated in the future. A problem is really only fixed once it can be made sure that it is not likely to happen again. Each of these steps require methodical effort in figuring out the details, something that is very hard to teach in a classroom and better experienced.

On one of the last nights of my program in Rome, some of us went to see the Trevi Fountain. We had the entire night planned, we would eat dinner, take the tram, take pictures at the fountain, and then get some late-night gelato on the way back. After exiting the tram and about halfway from the tram stop to the fountain, one of out of our group felt ill. She went to sit down by the side of the sidewalk and proceeded to tell us she was feeling worst. Our group took to problem solving and worked to apply these problem solving steps. First we identified that our groupmate was not feeling well, and after asking her some questions, because of something she ate at dinner. We figured that it had something to do with her stomach acting up, so we came up with a plan together for getting her some medication, but we did not know how to get it quickly.

Two of us split up to see if they could find a nearby pharmacy that was still open this late, one split up to go back to our apartment because she had some stomach medication in her room, and I remained with our sick groupmate to make sure she was alright and to keep everyone else informed. In about twenty-five minutes, our groupmate came back with medicine we needed to fix our sick groupmate's stomach problems. In coming up with our solution, we made sure to think quickly and realistically the options that would guarantee that we could help our sick groupmate, which was some way to get stomach medication.

In problem solving, it's often common to tunnel on what others can do for us. This has a bit to do with solving problems from a position of comfort. Problem-solving takes a lot of things into account and being able to handle problems in an efficient manner can be challenging. Often times, we are facing problems while being in a less than ideal position. However, facing a problem while in an uncomfortable position builds the experience that the classroom cannot teach, it's how we grow. Problems are the norm in our lives and building a greater sense of awareness to them, learning strategies to deal with them, and being sensitive to the situation are all aspects of problem-solving that a leader need. (Morton & Grace, 1988)

#3 – Flexibility

Flexibility is a leadership skill that every individual need in both their professional and personal life. This is because our lives are full of unknown variables and how we adjust to those variables can reflect who we are as a leader. For this paper, flexibility can be defined as the ability to adjust one's own behavior to changing circumstances and to work in ambiguous environments. (Farrugia & Sanger, 2017) In leadership, flexibility can be referred to as the guiding philosophy behind what makes up a situational leadership style. With situation leadership generalized to being

the leader weighs all the variables relevant to a project, such as team members, time, resources, etc. in order to consider the best course of action. (Graeff, 1983) This style of leadership is one that is favored due to how it considers the analysis of the bigger picture, its key components, and how best to adapt leadership style or strategy to maximize efficiency. Adding to the fact that leadership is often messy with a lot of things that can do right and wrong. This has helped to push a shift in leadership where it is a bit less about the variables of the situation and more about the variable that is the leader, how they handle themselves and their team in the face of change is just as important as the external variables a leader must account for. (Yukl, 2012) Optimization in the workplace is no longer just the lower-level workers who have to constantly adjust to management, but for both sides to have the flexibility to cooperate with one another.

During the summer of 2019, I had an extremely packed summer vacation back-to-back. I was a part of a study abroad program to Italy, an internship in Australia, and a week of training from being selected as an ambassador at my university's Honors program. This left me one week at the end of it all to kick-back and get ready for Fall Quarter. Although it ended up being the best summer of my life thus far, in order to be successful, I had to be flexible with my constantly changing environments. From finishing up Spring Quarter to going to Italy for an intensive four week history program to a six week internship in an unfamiliar industry to preparing for my leadership responsibilities back home, it was an experience that really stretched the limits of how much and how quickly I would be able to adjust and transition between the different sets of responsibilities. An experience that taught me I would be able to be flexible enough to mold myself into a position of comfort regardless of wherever I was in the world and whatever I was doing.

Flexibility is a skill that many of us take for granted. It is easy to assume that no matter what happens, whatever difficulty, we will be able to make the necessary adjustments within

ourselves to succeed. However, understanding and leveraging flexibility requires an understanding of the limits of one's flexibility. (Yukl, 2012) Flexibility is about being accountable for one's own ability to be at their best in the face of extraordinary external and/or internal circumstances. To move seamlessly between different responsibilities is no easy feat and being put in unfamiliar experiences where flexibility is required is how we learn to push our limits and adapt.

#4 – Confidence

Confidence is one of the most important leadership skills when it comes to fostering an individual style of leadership. It is a skill that can be the difference between being heard and being ignored. For this paper, confidence can be defined as the ability to make decisions based on one's own convictions and to trust in one's own competence. (Farrugia & Sanger, 2017) Confidence can be translated to a sense of self-leadership, being able to take charge of a situation or task out of one's own conviction. (Prussia et al., 1998) Confidence can also be translated into a sense of self-efficacy, which is the extent and individual believes themselves to be capable of successfully accomplishing something. (Prussia et al., 1998) Leadership can no longer be a strict top to bottom chain of command as it was in the past, as each member of a company will progressively take up a larger share of the responsibilities, and it is essential that each member is able to operate with some degree of autonomy. Managing and promoting this sense of autonomy, derived from confidence, can be related to employee performance because confidence in oneself encourages the development of leadership behaviors. Starting from an employee who might only listen to orders to the end goal of an employee who is able pitch their own ideas, ideas out of their own conviction.

A large part of my internship in Australia was sales, promoting and advertising new food & beverage products to distributors and retailors across Australia. I have always been very hesitant

when it came to sales and I would be lying to say I am not hesitant still. When I first started promoting client products, I asked for a script because I did not know how to go about making a pitch for a product. I also asked for a script because I did not believe enough in myself to make a good pitch. Overtime though, as I gained more exposure to manufacturers, distributors, and retailors, I decided to give it a shot. I referenced past scripts and challenged myself to write something that was short, descriptive, and compelling. Mid-way through my six-week internship, I was writing my own scripts to send out and I was understanding that I can be confident in what I have to say, even in a professional context. All because I decided I had to take that first step in self-leadership to request that I make my own pitch and the self-efficacy to send it out.

Confidence in an employee can go a long way in a professional setting. Being able to assertive ourselves in the workplace can be a difficult task, but it is something that a lot of companies value. The goal of being confident for the individual to understand that authority and rank does not define our ability to be creative and innovative. (Bennis, 1959) Confidence is built, no book will teach someone how to be confident because confidence comes from something innate. Confidence is a part of the individual, just as much as leadership is a part of that same individual and only through experiencing it can the confidence of being one's ideal leader or leadership style be realized. Everyone wants confidence, but just because some of us are not born as seemingly confident as others does not mean it is not a part of who we are as an individual and as a leader. People can often tell when someone believes in what they are saying or not, and it is the ones who believe in what they have to say that get people to listen.

#5 – Teamwork

Teamwork and leadership go hand in hand, a good leader must work well with others and be able to motivate others. A leader that does not have good teamworking skills should, arguably, not be a leader at all. For this paper, teamwork can be defined as the ability to collaborate with a diverse group of people, work within different cultural structures, and to coordinate towards a common objective. (Farrugia & Sanger, 2017) Teamwork can be related to leadership via the concept of shared leadership, where each member of the team takes up a bit of the leadership rather than having it be focused on one person. (Carson et al., 2007) By allowing each member of the team to contribute to the overall leadership, it promotes a sense of shared purpose, social support, and voice that leads to improved performance because each team member is empowered and encouraged to contribute. (Carson et al., 2007) This style of leadership, prioritizing teamwork, works to allow members of a team to be able to express their creativity and leverage their diversity. Due to the lack of a rigid structure of authority, an increased sense of collaboration and cooperation is fostered among individuals that help to break the mindset that teamwork is initiated by the one designated leader. Shared leadership can emerge through two sets of activities, the members must offer leadership and seek to influence the direction, motivation, and support of the group and the team as a whole must be willing to rely on different members to be the leader. (Carson et al., 2007) These two sets of activities give team members the opportunity to recognize that the team is more than they are, that everyone else has just as much to contribute to leadership as they do. This fosters a sense of team connectivity that empowers every single member and boosts performance.

Due to the fact that the company I interned at in Australia was a start-up, I got a lot of opportunities to interact with both my boss/mentor and my co-workers. Going into the internship, I had the mindset that since I did not know much, I would only be able to contribute whatever my

mentor told me to do. However, as I became more acclimated to the culture of the office, I realized that we were all equally valued to pitch and spearhead little projects that could improve the business. One example of this was when we first learned that we would not be able to sell kids' food products in New South Wales (NSW) unless they passed the star rating system that was based on how healthy the product was, how long they could be stored, etc. A co-worker I did some research and found an organization where we could register our kids' products called Healthy Kids and for a fee, they would also advertise whatever product we registered. We pitched this idea to my mentor because we had hit a roadblock for how to get our kids products into NSW and my mentor decided to give me the go ahead, having me take charge of this product registration project in cooperation with my co-worker due to my co-worker having another project she was already working on. By the end of my internship, I had managed to register three products with Healthy Kids and realized that even in a different environment, I had something to contribute to the team and was able to lead it through.

In our modern workplace teamwork is the new norm. With many considering teamwork as a crucial factor in the success of innovative projects that can generate tremendous value for the company. (Hoegl & Gemuenden, 2001) This is simply because cooperation among co-workers can lead to exponentially more value than merely assigning tasks. For example, in my scenario, my mentor and other co-workers were off doing other tasks and by trusting me to pull my weight and contribute to the team, they were able to finish their own tasks without having to worry about product registrations. Teamwork is a skill that will only become more and more prevalent as the business world continue to progress because good teamwork has the benefit of accomplishing more tasks and projects, and the benefit of promoting a collaborative company culture that allows employees to be their best.

#6 – Communication

Out of these six skills, communication is a skill that is typically more of a preventative measure versus a reactive one. Good communication solves problems by ensuring those problems do not exist in the first place, which is why good communication skills are a must or otherwise unnecessary problems will continue to creep up. However, in many cases, communication ends up being used in a reactive fashion to clear up problems. Communication can be defined as the ability to convey ideas to others, using clear and effective means that accounts for the audience. (Farrugia & Sanger, 2017) In leadership, the value of communication can be seen when it comes to the supportiveness, assuredness, and preciseness with subordinates and co-workers. (de Vries et al., 2010) Communication serves as the link between meaning and action, conveying an idea and then translating that idea into something tangible. (Donnellon et al., 1986) Regardless of how good an idea or concept is, if there is a failure in communicating the idea, the idea will not mean much. In effectively translating the meaning behind communication to action, there has to be a consensus of understanding among everyone. (Donnellon et al., 1986) If everyone is not on the same page, then there has been a flaw in the communication, and it should be a combined effort to figure out what went wrong in the communication process.

While in Greece, our group of students really enjoyed this one particular gyros spot because it was cheap, filling, and nearby to our apartment. A group of us went to this spot almost every evening after our daily activities, so much so that most of us got sick of eating gyros by the end of the trip. However, as our group kept going, we noticed that the waitress serving us progressively seemed to dislike us coming. This never affected the quality of service she gave us, but she would occasionally give us looks. We did not do anything at first, but we kept feeling bad, like we were doing something wrong and/or causing a disturbance by going there. Sure enough, we found out

that we were after asking the waitress. She told us that the people here wanted to use their evenings in this square to unwind from their day, but whenever we came we would be loud and disruptive. She told us that some people had complained, but she knew we were foreigners and so did not want to give us a bad impression. After this, we were more cautious to not be loud and disruptive while buying gyros, luckily since we had assignments to do as the trip went on, it became more convenient for us to take the gyros as takeout. This experience really shocked me because I've always been told I'm a quiet person, but it made me realize quiet means different things around the world.

Within the workplace, communication is essential in both transitioning meaning into action and to avoid unnecessary conflict. Being able to effectively communicate what is needed and what is not needed in an efficient and concise manner is the hallmark of good communication skills. This is especially desirable in the workplace because everyone has a lot to do and explaining something in a complicated fashion will only frustrate the listener. Communication is also essential for avoiding unnecessary conflict, as most workplace conflicts stem from misunderstandings between co-workers. Sometimes, it matters less the intention that the speaker has for their words than the intentions the listener perceives of the speaker's words.

Conclusion

In writing this paper, the attempt was to show study abroad as a valuable resource that can be utilized to develop leadership skill. With the analysis presented within this paper written as a reflection of the experience of one undergraduate student and how study abroad has had a positive impact in relation to these six leadership skills. Although study abroad does have notable tradeoffs, as mentioned in the Significance and Tradeoffs, such as cost, time, and a lot of uncertainty, with

the uncertainty being what makes the theoretical and practical so different when it comes to study abroad. This is because it is highly unlikely that two students will have the exact same study abroad experience, with benefits that can vary or have the trip just become an absolute waste of time. However, this uncertainty with an unknown environment presents itself as a unique opportunity unlike any other to build perspective on the world and break down pre-existing notions of how things are. The beauty of study abroad, like most other opportunities, is that its value is what you choose to make of it. How much you explore, how much you try, how much you experience, and how much you grow is all up to you. Although the main focus of this paper was on a personal note and thus was in no way an empirical analysis of the benefits of study abroad, hopefully it can help be a pre-cursor to more research and discussion on the value of study abroad as a resource for nurturing the leadership skills of the next generation. If nothing else, then hopefully from these experiences abroad, it can prove that study abroad has the opportunity to open more doors than anyone might be able to recognize without having gone abroad. The hope is that this paper will encourage a future undergraduate student to either take the journey abroad themselves or to continue research into the impacts of study abroad.

With the modern world becoming increasingly interconnected, we have a unique opportunity to expand our potential for an influx of new ideas and innovations. The future prosperity of businesses will depend upon how much we are able to expand the pie by introducing new innovative ways to create value and that starts with developing a foundation of leadership skills.

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