

Does Study Abroad Increase Employability?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the competencies and experiences valued by prospective employers in the agriculture and natural resources (ANR) industry to understand if study abroad experiences increase employability. All recruiters agreed interpersonal communication and leadership skills are necessary to be effective in their organizations and a majority of the recruiters had an interest in hiring employees with previous study abroad experience despite somewhat ambivalent views on the importance of cultural and global competencies for employees. Facilitators of study abroad programs in ANR should emphasize the skills sought by recruiters and overtly create opportunities for students to develop these skills.

Introduction/Theoretical Framework

The international expansion of businesses in the 21st century has underscored the need for talented and trained college graduates prepared to work in a global economy; agricultural companies are no different (Bybee and Fuchs, 2006; Dunavant and Heiss, 2005; McDowell et al., 2008). Flattening of the world (Friedman, 2006) through increases in trade agreements and rapid advances in technology has expanded many agricultural companies into international organizations with hubs in many nations. Examples include Syngenta, Archer Daniels Midland and John Deere. As agricultural companies increase their global positions, they "have begun to recognize the importance of recruiting personnel with knowledge and understanding of cultural issues, as well as the capacity to manage relationships and a culturally diverse workforce" (Crossman and Clarke, 2009, p. 599).

Employers often do not put much value in study abroad programs despite wanting students to have international experiences (Crawford et al., 2011). Crawford et al., (2011) found employers, students, faculty and alumni rank international experiences the lowest of all experiences that students are exposed to during their academic careers. According to Matherly (2004),

managers think study abroad programs are filled mostly with "students [who] lived with other Americans, took courses from U.S. professors and socialized mostly among themselves" (Herren, 2006; Matherly, 2004, p. 9). However, Gardner et al., (2009) found many of these managers "had no first-hand experience with these programs because study abroad was not available to them during their undergraduate days or they were not aware these programs existed" (p. 19).

Study abroad programs provide students with the opportunity to learn about another culture while continuing their education through a variety of activities and experiences. Nearly 280,000 students in the United States participated in a study abroad program in 2011 (Redden, 2012). Students today understand the importance of diversifying their educational portfolio to ensure better candidacy for employment (JWT Education, 2003), and employers are looking for "graduates [who] are capable of contributing to 'economic competitiveness in a global context'" (Cranmer, 2006, p. 170). However, students need assistance "unpacking" these international experiences (Crawford et al., 2011).

The responsibility is on students to effectively articulate how their study abroad participation enhanced their employability given that managers may be misinformed or negatively prejudiced against study abroad experience. Despite evidence indicating managers have poor opinions of study abroad experience, Matherly (2004) indicated companies have an interest in students with "meaningful 'real world experience' with another culture" and who can "speak about [their] experience in terms of the transferable skills that he or she developed while abroad and how they can be applied to the workplace" (p. 9). The conflicting research highlights the need to better understand how students with study abroad experience can frame their experiences in messages that are understood and valued by prospective employers. The study reported in the following sections was intended to address this need.

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The researchers approached this study through the lens of developing human capital. Since the 1950's, human capital has been the foundation for why individuals should focus on the development of key skills and knowledge (Schultz, 1961). Human capital originated as an economic concept promoting the development of a stronger, more able and competitive workforce. Schultz (1961) contended "the productive capacity of human beings is now vastly larger than all other forms of wealth taken together" (p. 2). An individual's personal investment in activities that produce measureable outcomes in skill, knowledge and "other similar attributes" creates a working model for human capability (Schultz, 1961, p.8).

To improve one's capabilities there are five major categories of emphasis: health, on-the-job training, formal education, study programs and migration (Schultz, 1961). According to Becker (1962), human capital is one's investment in activities that will have considerable impact in the future. Both Schultz and Becker placed considerable emphasis on education as being the primary means for developing human capital.

According to Griliches (1997), an individual with low initial human capital may improve that situation by investing in intensive full-time schooling followed up with on-going training. Over the past fifty years, education has been the primary targeted means for ensuring employability in certain career fields (Griliches, 1997). However, if the return on investment begins to diminish with market saturation, then individuals must seek out alternative ways or experiences to build human capital that provide added value.

To guide the development and interpretation of this study, the researchers consulted literature within a context of agriculture and natural resources (ANR) related to: (a) general skills and competencies desired by employers of new graduates, (b) cultural and global competencies of graduates and (c) the impacts of study abroad on developing competencies.

General Skills and Competencies Desired by Employers

The literature generally supports that employers value soft skills in new employees as much or more than they value technical skills (Crawford et al., 2011). For example, Alston et al., (2009) found technical competencies in mathematics, social sciences, agricultural sciences, physical sciences, biological sciences and the humanities were all rated as less important than soft skills. In contrast Jogan and Herring (2007) found employers in the equine industry value a mixture of technical and soft skills. The contemporary literature is beginning to provide a better understanding of the specific soft skills desired by employers.

Communication skills are widely valued by employers (Crawford et al., 2011; Jogan and Herring, 2007). Several specific aspects of communication emerged in the literature. These included: understanding instructions (Alston et al., 2009), listening (Alston et al., 2009; Robinson et al., 2007) and verbalizing (Alston et

al., 2009). Two studies highlighted the importance of communication skills but failed to elaborate on specific aspects of those skills (Jogan and Herring, 2007; Radhakrishna and Bruening, 1994).

Employers also valued problem-solving skills (Crawford et al., 2011) and numerous terms were used to describe this set of skills. Some examples include decision making/problem solving (Crawford et al., 2011), decision making (Robinson et al., 2007) and analytic skills (Robinson et al., 2007). Two studies implied a certain level of technical understanding was needed to solve problems (Jogan and Herring, 2007; Radhakrishna and Bruening, 1994). Despite the desire for problem-solving skills, employers often indicated that the new graduates were deficient in these skills (Robinson et al., 2007).

The ability to work with others is also valued by employers (Crawford et al., 2011). Some specific examples included teamwork (Alston et al., 2009; Crawford et al., 2011), leadership (Crawford et al., 2011), working well with others (Robinson et al., 2007), ease to work with (Irlbeck and Akers, 2009) and interpersonal skills (Jogan and Herring, 2007; Radhakrishna and Bruening, 1994).

Another common set of skills valued by employers related to self-direction. This concept is represented with several terms in the literature like self-management (Crawford et al., 2011), ability to work independently (Robinson et al., 2007b), organization and time management (Robinson et al., 2007b) and dependability (Alston et al., 2009).

Cultural and Global Competencies of Graduates

Today's college graduates must be culturally aware and prepared to work in a global economy (National Research Council, 2009). The need to internationalize the undergraduate curricula in agriculture and natural resources has been noted for some time (Duffy et al., 1998) and is supported by students studying agriculture and natural resources (Sammons and Martin, 1997). Students value global competence and seek out international experiences to "enhance their overall life experience, for the opportunity to live in another culture and to increase their employability" (Briers et al., 2010, p. 5) and ultimately increase their human capital.

According to Russo and Osborne (2004), a globally competent student: (a) understands the world from multiple perspectives, (b) understands international dimensions of their discipline, (c) is able to communicate across languages and cultures, (d) demonstrates awareness and adaptability related to other cultures and (e) continues to develop his/her global competence throughout life. In a study supported by the American Association of Colleges and Universities, Hart Research Associates (2010) found employers want to hire graduates who: "[have] the ability to understand the global context of situations and decisions, [understand] global issues and developments and their implications for the future, [understand] the role of the United States

in the world and [understand] cultural diversity in America and other countries” (pp. 1-2). In a study specific to agricultural education, Conner and Roberts (2013) found graduates needed to have a basic understanding of political, cultural and agricultural issues from around the world.

Despite the calls for preparing students to work in a global environment, there are several indications that this has not yet happened. In general, students do not understand agriculture and natural resources on a global scale. Redmann et al., (1998) found students were deficient in their understanding international agriculture. In a similar study, Wingenbach et al. (2003) found only approximately 5% of the students in their study could earn a passing score on an assessment of their knowledge of international agriculture.

The Impacts of Study Abroad Experiences on Developing Competencies

The outcomes of study abroad programs have been well documented in the literature. The specific outcomes vary by each program. The impacts of study abroad programs include changes in technical knowledge, cultural awareness, attitudes and soft skills. For example, in a service oriented study abroad program, Black et al., (2013) documented student impacts in the themes of adaptation, culture, collaboration, communication and value of knowledge. In a study of three different study abroad programs, Coers et al., (2012) found students had increased understanding of agriculture in the country visited, as well as international agriculture in general. Students also had more favorable attitudes about traveling internationally. Student perceptions about the importance of international educational experiences were mixed. In an earlier study, Zhai and Scheer (2002) found study abroad programs impact students’ global perspectives and their awareness of cultural diversity.

The existing literature examines the desired competencies for new graduates from multiple perspectives and generally agrees that soft skills are the most desired skills for new employees. The literature also generally supports the importance of global and cultural competence for today’s college graduate. Research has also shown study abroad programs can develop technical and soft skills. However, one voice is missing in this literature: the voice of the recruiter that travels to colleges and universities using career fairs in an effort to find the most qualified candidates. Van Vianen (2000) referred to the role of a recruiter as being responsible for assessing potential employees’ fit. This fit is often gauged on three levels: (a) cognitive ability and work motivation, (b) job specific cognitive abilities, knowledge and personality traits, or (c) organizational culture. This is often referred to as “P-O” or person-organization fit (Van Vianen, 2000, p. 113). These recruiters serve as the gatekeepers or first screeners of new graduates seeking employment (Blevins, 2013). Understanding which competencies are sought by recruiters and their perceptions of the value of study abroad in developing

those competencies is important for helping students increase their employability.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore the competencies and experiences valued by prospective employers in the ANR industry to understand if study abroad experiences increase employability. Specifically, the objectives were to (a) identify the skills and experiences sought by recruiters, (b) describe the perceived importance of cultural and global competencies for employees in each recruiter’s organization and (c) determine if recruiters had interest in hiring prospective employees with study abroad experience. A basic, or generic, design (Merriam, 2009) was used to guide the study.

Context

In February of 2013, a Career Expo was hosted by the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at the University of Florida. Over forty employers attended the Career Expo. Twelve of these were purposively selected for interviewing. Selection criteria emphasized the national reputation of each employer as well as the size of the employer, with preference given to organizations that are likely to hire a large number of new graduates each year.

The recruiters from twelve employers were initially targeted for inclusion as potential participants. Representatives from eleven of the twelve employers provided consent to be interviewed. The employers were Dow AgroSciences, LLC; Florida Nursery, Growers, and Landscape Association; Helena Chemical Company; LYKES BROS. INC.; Monsanto; Murphy Brown LLC; Rabo AgriFinance; USDA Farm Service Agency; USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service; USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service; and Walt Disney World Animal Programs. Careers offered by these companies are broadly related to biotechnology, crop production and protection, ranch management, pork production, agricultural finance and credit, food safety, natural resource conservation and animal husbandry.

Data Collection

Primary data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted during the Career Expo. The University of Florida Institutional Review Board 2 approved the study protocol (2013-U-0101). Representatives from each of the consenting employers were interviewed individually by a researcher from the team. Participants were asked to discuss (a) the skills and experiences they look for in potential employees, (b) if cultural and global skills, knowledge and perspectives were necessary for success and how potential employees might demonstrate those, (c) if the employer worked to develop cultural and global skills, knowledge and perspectives in its employees, (d) the importance of cultural and global skills, knowledge and perspectives for career progression and (e) the employer’s potential

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interest in hiring prospective employees with study abroad experience. All interviews were audio recorded with written informed consent from the participants prior to data collection.

Data Analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed professionally by an independent party. Two of the researchers independently conducted the initial analysis of the data set. Peer debriefing occurred with the entire team of researchers to vet the initial findings and develop the final interpretation of the data. Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This generated theoretical properties of each category, providing an understanding of the data and its relation to and effect on other categories (Erlandson et al., 1993).

The initial analysis of the data included reading and determining recurring themes throughout the data. The thick rich description of the data set allowed for inductive analysis leading to the discovery of patterns, themes and categories (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Similarities emerged in responses among respondents. These similarities in the data provided the foundation for generating identifiable categories within each objective area. The defining rule for the constant comparative method is “while coding an incident for a category, compare it with the previous incidents in the same and different groups coded in the same category” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 106). Data were coded into emergent categories and through constant comparison of the categories and their properties, the researchers developed theoretical perspectives about the contexts.

When conducting qualitative research, potential for researcher bias exists. All of the researchers belong to a center that advocates for the importance of global experiences for university students. Three of the faculty researchers had prior experience leading short-term study abroad trips for undergraduate and graduate students. One of the faculty researchers lived in Europe for a large portion of childhood. Amongst the graduate student researchers, three had experience participating in, coordinating and/or evaluating short-term study abroad trips, two were returned Peace Corps Volunteers, two are first-generation Americans and one had experience on an extended study abroad. Collectively, the research team had traveled to 36 unique countries at the time of this study for personal or professional reasons.

A pro-global education bias may have influenced the analysis and interpretation of findings. However, the research team used several techniques recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to enhance trustworthiness. An audit trail was maintained throughout the data analysis. Member checks were conducted with the respondents to allow for verification of data and findings. This provided respondents with the opportunity to correct or clarify any statements recorded. Finally, two peer debriefings to discuss the findings were conducted with professionals (a) not associated with the study, (b) not associated

with the global center and (c) with limited personal or professional international experience.

Results

Objective 1 – Skills & Experiences Sought by Recruiters

Leadership and communication skills

All respondents focused on the development of interpersonal leadership and communication skills as important for prospective employees. The identified skills were inclusive of the willingness to learn, self-confidence, motivation, integrity and industriousness. There was also considerable emphasis placed on the need for written and verbal communication skills (R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R11). Recruiter 3 noted “In every aspect of our job we must be able to communicate verbally as well as on paper ... so that is probably the number one thing.” Recruiter 4 provided that “you have to have people skills and be able to have strong writing and communication skills. They are huge [for our organization].”

Relationship building

Another consistent theme was the ability to build relationships (R3, R4, R5, R7, R8, R9). For example, Recruiter 3 shared “For us it is important that you are personable, that you can speak to someone in person, that you are not afraid to talk to them face to face and that you can shake hands.” Recruiter 9 explained, “Being able to listen to somebody, understand what their needs are and develop solutions that are in line with their needs and their available resources [is critical].” With respect to building relationships, it was also noted that an understanding of diverse systems and cultures would be beneficial (R1). Respondents noted an understanding of systems and their diversity helps establish more positive relationships. Recruiter 12 said “I definitely think that an understanding of diverse cultures is necessary [for our organization].”

Adaptable and flexible

The ability to adapt to changing systems and demonstrate flexibility with respect to complex issues was an emergent theme. Respondents noted that with the emerging trends of globalization and diverse stakeholders, it is becoming increasingly important to be flexible and open to the ever-changing landscape of organizational practice (R1, R3, R6, R8, R9). Recruiter 6 explained employees within his/her organization were charged with many different roles and responsibilities requiring different skill sets, which created a need for individuals who could adapt based on situational circumstances. Similarly, Recruiter 3 reported “We look for flexibility. We want people who are not only necessarily adapted to change, but also people who are able to go to different territories and units.”

Academic preparation

The respondents provided a myriad of perspectives with respect to specific degree programs. The majority

of respondents noted the agriculturally related competencies and perspectives that students learn in their academic programs are highly useful, but secondary to the interpersonal leadership and communication skills developed while in the university setting (R2, R3, R5, R6, R7, R8, R11). Specifically, respondents noted a foundational understanding of the ANR industry is a benefit to the new hired employees (R2, R5, R6, R11), but a strong combination of interpersonal skills and agricultural perspectives would create an ideal candidate (R2, R5). Recruiter 5 said “[*Interpersonal skills*] are first, and then we are looking for experience in agriculture or knowledge of agriculture. [*Agricultural*] knowledge is definitely a plus, but it is not required for a position here.”

It was clear from the interviews conducted that soft skills are in high demand by employers, even more so than technical skills. All recruiters agreed the development of interpersonal communication and leadership skills is necessary to be effective in their organizations. This finding is consistent with prior research exploring employability skills (Alston et al., 2009; Crawford et al., 2011; Jogan and Herring, 2007; Robinson, Garton and Terry, 2007; Robinson, Garton and Vaughn, 2007). Written and verbal skills as well as relationship-building abilities were also identified as important. To capitalize on this finding, past study abroad participants should emphasize how their experiences helped develop their communication and leadership skills.

Objective 2 – Perceived Importance of Cultural and Global Skills for Employees

Some of the respondents explained they were not explicitly looking for global perspectives and experience (R2, R3, R5, R11) but rather “graduates who are willing to learn from their experiences” (R2). Recruiter 5 felt global perspectives and experience were “important” for personal development but would not be required for prospective employees “to perform the responsibilities of their job.” However, a majority of the respondents noted the importance of global skills, knowledge and perspectives as employee longevity increased with the company (R2, R3, R4, R7, R9, R11). Recruiter 3 said “*Global skills will help you move ahead. The more you can see globally, the more likely it is that [an employee] will move up the chain of command.*” Recruiter 7 provided a similar perspective, reporting “*If [employees] hope to develop themselves, be high performers and advance in the company, they will likely have to develop [global skills, knowledge and perspectives].*”

Some of the respondents discussed specific programs administered by their organizations that foster the development of cultural and global skills in their employees (R3, R5, R7, R8, R11). Despite reporting cultural and global skills were not skills explicitly sought after in prospective employees, Recruiter 3 later said “*It is absolutely important to develop [global perspectives] while they are with our organization. We offer classes and on the job training to develop these.*” Recruiter 7 shared employees in his/her organization learn global

and cultural skills through “*on the job training, formal and informal training and coaching.*”

Less support was voiced for the importance of cultural and global competencies for prospective employees. Several respondents stated cultural and global competencies were not vital criteria to be successful in securing employment or maintaining employment. However, other respondents articulated the need for employees to develop those competencies during employment at their organizations and several were able to describe organizational efforts for that purpose. This study’s results are interesting because they seem to contradict the growing globalization of organizations and companies (Crossman and Clarke, 2009), especially ANR companies. According to Crossman and Clarke, stakeholder insights included clear associations between perceived outcomes of international experience and graduate employability. However, much of the prior research explores perceptions from a myriad of organizations whereas this study was limited to the viewpoints of a small number of ANR companies and U.S. governmental agencies.

Objective 3 – Role of Study Abroad in Prospective Employee Development

Recruiters were asked to gauge their perceptions of their organization’s interest in hiring students with study abroad experience. Seven (R1, R3, R5, R7, R8, R10, R11) of the eleven recruiters reported study abroad experience was a consideration during the hiring process. Of the four recruiters (R2, R4, R6, R9) who said it was not, three acknowledged study abroad experience does develop skills and adds “to the overall mix of attributes” (R9) but they did not feel it was a priority. Recruiter 4 was quite frank, reporting “*I am not sure, because I don’t believe I have ever had an employee who studied abroad, so I couldn’t give you an honest answer.*”

Enthusiasm for prospective employees with study abroad experience was evident in the responses of the other recruiters. Recruiters’ responses began with or included terms like “definitely” (R1), “absolutely” (R3, R10) and “for sure” (R8). They spoke of the value of study abroad experiences in broadening students’ perspectives. For example, Recruiter 5 felt students with study abroad experience “*might bring a little more to the table as far as perspective and different ideas new and innovative thinking is very important.*” Recruiter 7 also felt a difference existed between prospective employees with study abroad experience and those without, further elaborating study abroad experience is important: “*Because it gives you a better appreciation of why things work the way they work. But, I mean, the U.S. is not the world. We depend on customers and we depend on suppliers and depending on how we interact with those countries, or how we interact with those cultures ... we can get a lot of benefits from them So when you talk to somebody who hasn’t traveled outside of the U.S. and somebody who has traveled outside of the U.S., they seem to be more ... I wouldn’t say educated, but*

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they understand why sometimes [international opinions about Americans differ] ... because you get to see things from a different lens in a different culture."

Similarly, a few recruiters (R2, R5, R7) indicated they would be more likely to select the prospective employee with study abroad experience when faced with otherwise comparable options. This was true even for one of the recruiters (R2) who indicated study abroad experience was not something his/her organization specifically looked for in prospective employees. R10 felt that study abroad experience was an indicator of character: *"Studying abroad shows education ... shows their determination and shows that [the prospective employee] went up and beyond, you know, what the normal student would do. You know, if you go out and you know, you studied abroad, you are paying your money and you are actually learning an advanced skill, you are showing that you possibly, in our work force, that you are willing to go up and beyond to do that, so, I mean, it gives you a leg up on competition that way. (R10)"*

Recruiters were clear that prospective employees would need to be able to communicate how their study abroad experience would be of value to the organization. Recruiter 2 explained: *"For us, it is definitely much more important that they have experiences either within what you are doing or experiences that can translate to something that we can use as an employer. So, if the study abroad program gives them those skills, that's great."*

Recruiter 5 emphasized the applicability of the experience as well, noting, *"if there was something ... pertinent to that country that is pertinent to us, I might ask them something about that."* Recruiter 10 was more direct, stating that he/she would want to know how a prospective employee would apply "the ethics that they used overseas, abroad" to "my company." Finally, variance in the ability of prospective employees to successfully communicate the value of their study abroad experience was noted. Recruiter 11 noted, *"I think some of them do a better job than others ... I think that has to do with their personality The ones that feel travel is important, they want you to know that."*

A majority of the recruiters expressed an interest in hiring employees with previous study abroad experience. This strong enthusiasm awkwardly contrasts the somewhat ambivalent views on the importance of cultural and global competencies for employees. A possible explanation can be extrapolated from the work of Gardner et al. (2009), who found that while international experiences and study abroad experiences are synonymous, employers do not operationalize the terms in the same fashion. It appears a similar problem may exist when exploring what recruiters look for from prospective employees. Recruiters may not realize the soft skills they seek are often the same skills included in conceptualizations of cultural and global competencies. In order to minimize this gap in understanding, job-seeking students need to communicate in terms understood by potential employers.

Similarly, Gardner et al. (2009) stated "the value of study abroad depends on how well the student can reflect on and articulate his or her experience" (p. 20). One of the interviewed recruiters for this study made the same observation. Students should be able to effectively communicate the skills acquired while traveling and learning about other cultures in such a way that enhances their contributions as potential employees, with a noted emphasis on how a study abroad experience has specifically led to the development of relevant soft skills. Facilitators of study abroad programs should consider making this an integral part of their post-experience activities.

Furthermore, it is important to better prepare students before they go abroad to maximize the development of the intended soft skills. Understanding the skills and competencies they will enhance through their experience a priori may make them more aware of instances when this is happening and thus better able to articulate their experiences in an interview setting. Facilitators of study abroad programs in ANR should help students understand the skills needed to be marketable upon graduation and overtly create opportunities of students to develop these skills. Future research should investigate best practices for accomplishing these outcomes.

Summary

This study examined experiences and competencies valued by college fair recruiters in the ANR industry. According to Shultz (1961) an individual is more likely to engage in activities, which have a greater likelihood to produce measureable outcomes in skill, knowledge and "other similar attributes" (p. 8). The skills and experiences identified in this study are complementary to study abroad. This finding reinforces the role of study abroad experience as a means for investing in human capital. As noted in Becker's (1962) work, individuals will invest in areas contributing to their economic future. Within this study, employers indicated that they would give more attention to a candidate with study abroad experience when all other factors were comparable. Past study abroad participants should be sure to highlight these experiences on their resumes and interviews to increase their employability.

As academic institutions across the world strive to expand the international opportunities available to students, it is important to be able to justify the need for such programs. If universities want to better serve their students and prepare them for the competitive, modern workforce, then they must see associations between the benefits from study-abroad programs and job recruitment. However, if career recruiters do not see high value in study abroad programs, it could lead to reduced funding and opportunities for students to gain international experiences. In addition, a reduction in study-abroad programs could stifle the development of soft skills sought after by employers and further reduce the value of college graduates in an aggressive, global market.

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