

## **A Research-Based Approach to Education Abroad Classification**

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The Forum on Education Abroad's Goal's Committee on Outcomes Assessment, building on the excellent foundational work of Lilli and John Engle ("Notes Toward a Classification of Study Abroad Programs," soon to be published in *Frontiers*), has adopted what we believe is a more rational and useful approach to classifying education abroad programs than the approach we now rely on.

### The Conventional Approach to Classification

As things now stand, programs are described in terms that, taken globally, provide for a sort of rough classification system. We conventionally refer to "island," "direct enrollment," "exchange," "hybrid," "faculty-led semester," "short term," "experiential" and "service learning" programs, among others. However, this sort of approach to classifying programs simply isn't workable, especially for research purposes. In the first place, program "types" frequently overlap: an "exchange," for example, can at the same time be a "direct enrollment" or a "faculty-led" program, and it may even be "short-term." An "island" program may enroll students for part of their courses at a local university, and a "faculty-led semester" or a "direct enrollment" program may provide opportunities for students to engage in "experiential" or "service learning" activities. For purposes of assessing learning outcomes, it's clear that this conventional approach is seriously flawed: a semester-length direct enrollment program that puts students in classrooms and houses them in apartments with other U.S. students will provide for very different types of learning than a semester program that includes, in addition to the classroom, structured experiential work and housing with a host family.

### A Research-Based Approach

The Forum's Goal Committee on Outcomes Assessment has concluded that studies designed to measure learning at different types of education abroad programs need to avoid this sort of classification-by-structure approach. Instead of starting with program structure, studies need to focus principally on student learning. The new system we favor is based on a simple proposition: that programs can be positioned along a linear axis according to the extent to which they provide students with structured, focused opportunities to integrate culturally. Conceived spatially, the more culturally integrative a program is, the farther to the right that program will fall along this continuum. Within this system, an individual program is not described as "short term" or as "semester direct enrollment," but is, rather, described with reference to the ways that the program responds to seven pre-determined program characteristics or components. This approach—which amounts to de-constructing programs into common

elements—allows student learning outcomes to be measured through providing a common basis of comparison across programs.

The committee has tentatively identified these seven characteristics and believes that assessment studies of the type that Georgetown, Dickinson, Minnesota and Rice are undertaking will provide data that will allow the field to identify how relatively important each of these is. We also agree that such studies may result in our eventually being able to assign co-efficients to each of these components in order to express concretely the relative importance of each to the others.

### A Direction for Future Research

The committee did reach a preliminary consensus that allowed us to assign approximate co-efficients to each program characteristic—recognizing, again, that such co-efficients are intuitive at this point, and that future research and analysis will eventually eventually allow us to test these intuitively-derived co-efficients. We are not including the co-efficients here: the committee prefers to wait until we have research data that will allow us to speak with more confidence about these. At this point, we are limiting ourselves to hypothesizing that the seven program characteristics below will impact student learning to a greater or lesser extent, that data from our research will allow us to identify the relative impact that each will have, and that we will be able to assign co-efficients to each that describe their relative impact on student learning.

### The Seven Program Characteristics

The Goal Committee hypothesizes that the program characteristics which will be shown to have the greatest impact on student learning abroad are:

- A. Length of stay
- B. Entry target language competence
- C. Extent to which target language is used in coursework on site
- D. Context of academic work (five typical scenarios here: home institution faculty accompany students, specially arranged courses on site taught by home-institution faculty, specially-arranged courses on site taught by host-institution faculty, direct enrollment, combinations of the above)
- E. Type of housing
- F. Well structured and guided cultural/experiential learning
- G. On-site mentoring that provides for reflection on all learning

## How to Describe Education Programs, Pending Research Data?

While we are confident that ongoing and future research will allow us to speak with more confidence about the impact of various program elements on student learning, we also recognize that all of us in the meantime need convenient terminology—what amounts to an approximate study abroad classification system that we can rely on, pending research results that will allow us to develop a system based on data rather than intuition. For rough descriptive (rather than research) purposes, then, we propose a classification system that takes into account three of the program characteristics that we believe significantly impact student learning: the nature of the classroom experience, duration of study, and language of instruction. We thus make reference to "island," "(semester or year) direct enrollment," "university institute," "university hybrid," "short-term" and "short-term faculty-led" programs, each of which we understand as follows:

In an "island" program, students take courses alongside other students from the home university. Faculty are from, or hired locally by, the home university. Classrooms are located outside any local host university, and courses (except for foreign language courses) are usually taught in English.

In a "direct enrollment" program, students enroll in regular host university courses taught by host university faculty in host university classrooms. They study in the local target language alongside students from the host university.

In a "university institute" program, students enroll in a host-university "institute" for international students, taking courses specially organized for these students. Faculty are hired by the host university. Students study alongside other international students, rather than regular university students. They usually enroll in at least one course that provides formal study of the local target language. The language of instruction of their other courses is often English (though some of their courses may be taught in the local target language, depending on the students' language proficiency).

In a "university hybrid" program, students can be enrolled both in specially arranged and in regularly scheduled university (or university institute) courses. The courses may all be physically located at the host university, or some may be offered at the host university and others at a location outside the university. At least some of the faculty are hired by the home university. Students study, in the specially-arranged courses, alongside other U.S. students (and sometimes alongside students from their own home institution only); they study alongside other international students or from regular university students, in the courses organized by the university. They may or may not take a course whose focus is the study of the local target language; and the language of instruction of their other courses is usually English (though if their language proficiency will allow it, they may enroll in courses in the target language as well).

A "short-term" program, which is often located at a host university, may last anywhere from one to ten weeks, and is usually offered during January terms, May terms or summers. Students generally study alongside other visiting international students; their instructors are hired by the host university; and the language of instruction is usually English (or the local target language for an intensive second-language program).

A "faculty-led short-term" program may or may not be located at a host university. It will last from one to ten weeks. Students will usually study alongside other home-university students. One or more home-university faculty members will lead the program; sometimes these home university faculty will teach one or more of the program courses, and sometimes the home university will hire local faculty to teach all or a part of the courses. The language of instruction is usually English (or the local target language in an intensive second-language program).