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2017

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### Recommended Citation

Miller, Shane, "Exploring Men's Motivations for Studying, and not Studying, Abroad" (2017). *Academic Affairs Publications*. 5.

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Exploring Men's Motivations for Studying, and not Studying, Abroad  
Shane Miller

A long-standing trend in collegiate study abroad experiences has been the continual underrepresentation of key student demographics. One of the most persistent of these disparities has been the lack of men studying abroad. Between the 1996 and 2007 academic years, men's participation rate in study abroad experiences consistently hovered at 35%. Female students, in other words, participated in study abroad at a rate nearly twice that of their male peers.

Table 1<sup>i</sup>  
Study Abroad Participation Rates by Gender

	'96-7	'97-8	'98-9	'99-0	'00-1	'01-2	'02-3	'03-4	'04-5	'05-6	'06-7	'07-8
Male	35.1	35.2	34.8	35.4	35.1	35.3	35.3	34.4	34.5	34.5	34.9	34.9
Female	64.9	64.8	65.2	64.6	64.9	64.7	64.7	65.6	65.5	65.5	65.1	65.1

Study abroad is recognized as a high-impact learning practice and is associated with numerous academic, personal and professional advantages. Among some of the first documented benefits were ones generally assumed to result from study abroad: increased language proficiency, improved self-confidence (Carlson, Burn, Useem & Yachimowicz, 1990) and increased international political concern (Carlson & Widaman, 1988).

A decreased tendency to stereotype or generalize about populations outside of the students' cultural backgrounds has also been attributed to study abroad. Drews, Meyer & Peregrine (1996) found that study abroad contributed to the ability for students to view members of different nationalities as individuals rather than a generalized ethnic or national mass, while Hill and Thomas (2005) found that even short-term study abroad programs could produce fewer stereotypical views of the host culture.

Numerous personal advantages have also been associated with study abroad. Dwyer and Peters (2004) found that students who studied abroad reported increased maturity, self-confidence, tolerance of ambiguity and understanding of their own cultural values and biases. Paige and Fry (2008) found that students who studied abroad were more civically engaged, sought more simplicity in life, and more philanthropically inclined.

Given the wide range and significance of advantages such as these, it is not surprising that attention has turned to identifying and rectifying the reasons that prevent underrepresented populations from studying abroad. For decades the prevailing wisdom was that male students did not study abroad at the same rate as female students because men enrolled in science and engineering courses at a higher rate than women, and such programs of study did not provide the flexibility to study abroad. This particular explanation has not held up under scrutiny,

however, for research has demonstrated that “women in traditionally male-dominated majors . . . also study abroad at about twice the rate of men.”<sup>ii</sup>

More recently researchers have examined a range of possible explanations for the gender gap in study abroad. One set of factors that has been identified is the social and cultural capital available to students interested in studying abroad. Salisbury, Paulsen & Pascarella (2010) found that gender played “a substantial role in altering the ways in which those forms of capital shape student decisions differently.” (615) One of the specific variables measured was the openness to diversity scale. In this case, “an increase in a student’s openness to diversity and challenge increased the probability that a student plans to study abroad for both women and men. However, the difference in the magnitude of this increase is much greater for men than for women.” (633)

In an examination of intent to study abroad, Stroud found that an expressed “interest in improving one’s understanding of other cultures and countries” had a positive influence on intent to study abroad. (491) While Stroud discovered that female students had odds of intending to study abroad 2.4 times higher than male students, this discrepancy was driven by the expressed importance of “improving their understanding of other countries and cultures.” (502)

Kim & Goldstein (2005) identified differing levels of language interest, intercultural communication apprehension, and ethnocentrism as significant variables accounting for the difference in male and female college students’ participation in study abroad. Regarding ethnocentrism in particular, female college students indicated significantly less ethnocentrism and prejudice than their male counterparts. (275)

When considered together, this admittedly small corpus of work suggests that attitudes toward other cultures combined with the perceived value of learning about other cultures, is a significant factor in contributing to the lower male participation rates in study abroad. Given that there is considerable research demonstrating that men score higher on measures of ethnocentrism, prejudice and racism than women, this study intended to expand upon this research by examining to what degree students demonstrated ethnocentric or prejudicial reasoning in their explanations for their reasons to study abroad or not.

This research project was thus designed around two hypotheses – that ethnocentrism influenced men’s decisions to study abroad; and that racial or ethnic prejudice influenced men’s decisions to study abroad. In addition, data collection was intended to explore what other factors men might provide behind their decision to study abroad or not.

To test these hypotheses and conduct exploratory research into other motivations, a series of focus groups were conducted with male students enrolled at St. John’s University. Focus groups have been identified as an effective way to examine

attitudes and beliefs about culture because they allow for a richer and more detailed explanation of a very complex phenomenon. In the spring of 2016 I began advertising through posters, emails, and class announcements for male volunteers to take part in one of two types of focus groups – one set to interview men who had studied abroad, or intended to study abroad, during their time at St. Johns, and one set to interview men who had not, and did not intend to, study abroad during their time here. Five focus groups of St. John’s students were conducted during the spring of 2016 – three focus groups of men who did not intend to study abroad, and two focus groups of men who had, or intended to, study abroad. In total, 32 men participated in the focus groups: 19 in the three groups who had not studied abroad, and 13 in the two groups that had studied abroad.

The focus groups were centered around a set of questions intended to probe for interest in study abroad in general, interactions with different cultural groups, and perceived barriers and incentives for study abroad. Participants in each focus group were asked the following set of questions:

1. When was the first time that you heard about or became aware of study abroad?
2. What were your initial impressions of study abroad?
3. At some point you may have made a conscious decision to study (or not study) abroad. If so, what were the main reasons behind your decision to go or not?
4. What reasons were some of the factors you considered in favor of studying (or not studying) abroad?
5. What kind of interactions with somebody from a culture other than yours have you had?
6. What were your perceptions about the nature of those interactions?

In addition, because I used a semi-structured interview protocol, I was able to ask follow up questions on responses that warranted additional explanation or development, as well as a final segment of the interview that allowed participants to ask their own questions or offer any final comments or clarifications.

### Primary Findings

Regarding my two primary hypotheses, the focus groups confirmed that one element of ethnocentrism, a lack of interest in other cultures, or a sense that other cultures are not worth knowing about, did, in fact, relate to men’s decisions to participate in study abroad. One of the strongest findings from this study was that there was a strong correlation between the amount of interaction that students had with someone from a culture different from their own and their likelihood of studying abroad. Among students who had studied abroad, twelve of thirteen of them described what I classified as significant interactions outside of the classroom with someone from a culture other than their own. For students who had not studied abroad, however, only four of the eighteen students interviewed had interactions with a student from a culture different from their own that could be

described as significant.<sup>1</sup> In addition, two of the four students who had significant interactions with someone from a different cultural background were either an exchange student themselves, or had completed a summer internship in another country.

Furthermore, student comments indicated that there was a profound difference between student's interest in such interactions, the perceived value of such interactions, and the quality of those interactions. Students who had studied abroad consistently indicated that they actively sought out interactions with someone from a different cultural background because they found such interactions pleasant, informative, or a good in itself. One student, for example, indicated "We [he and his friends] are all from different cultures but we get along really well. I think it is awesome. I wish there was more diversity here." A student in a different focus group, who had completed an internship abroad, explained that "I just love learning new things and exploring and that thing so it fascinates me being able to talk to people from different cultures and learn and I feel like I am bettering myself as well just being able to have a wider understanding because of my views."

Contrast the excitement and curiosity found in the above statement with students who had not interacted much with people from other cultures. One student, in talking about a Japanese classmate and his lack of interest in speaking to him said "I already know he is from Japan, and I don't really have any interest in asking him any questions about Japan because from what I know it is a highly populated country for being so small and having so many people and so I don't really have any questions." Another student with no interest in studying abroad distilled his lack of interest in study abroad to a lack of experiences that he was interested in.

If I am in a different country I am going to want to do the things that I want to go there for. If I want to go to Switzerland to go skiing and spend time in the mountains and go snowmobiling and do something fun I can't necessarily do here in Minnesota because they have such a better climate there. If I am close to being there in a city and having to do school work or just going and visiting old buildings in Italy I would rather do other things than just go and look at things I don't really care about because I would rather be doing activities that I will remember doing.

So SJU students who study abroad are those who also demonstrate a willingness to seek out interactions with people who they perceive as having different cultural backgrounds.

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<sup>1</sup> The main factor used to distinguish significant from insignificant interactions was whether those interactions were forced/required (in-class group work or a fellow member of an athletic team, for example) or whether they occurred naturally outside of class and were actively sought out. In addition, students comments about the quantity and quality of those interactions helped to separate significant from insignificant interactions.

In addition, several other factors emerged as consistent factors influencing men's study abroad decisions. The first of these was the willingness to be separated from social networks, specifically friends and family members. While men in both groups mentioned the separation from family and friends as a factor that made them hesitate to study abroad, the men who did not study abroad were the men who in their responses prioritized social activities. One student, for example, indicated that he had considered transferring out of SJU during his first semester, but decided to stay because of the friends that he made. When it came to study abroad, he explained "so I figured I only get four years with these people I have met here and while you may say that is a long time, I mean, is it?" Many other students shared similar sentiments. But even more than the people themselves, were the missed experiences that students indicated they would miss. One student explained "If I were going to do fall or spring I would miss homecoming or case day . . . it would definitely be what I missed at school not missing people and friends because I have had friends who have gone to study abroad and it wasn't different when they came back."

A closely-related set of responses about the potential of missing friends and activities was that most students indicated that they had heard many students talk about the close friendships and fun experiences that they had while studying abroad. Student comments often indicated considerable consideration being given to the give-and-take of missed social activities and time apart from friends versus the chance to develop new friendships and have no experiences. While readers of this report may cringe at the relative value being assigned to different experiences and the assumptions about the best part of studying abroad, this student's comments display the kind of experiential weighing, and preference for the known over the unknown, that I refer to.

I realized that staying here you still have great experiences like people who are studying abroad wouldn't experience. I know people who went abroad in the fall and came back and said they were disappointed they missed Johnnie-Tommy this year, *SportsCenter* with 70,000 people on campus. They were bummed they missed that. I was bummed I couldn't spend two months in Spain drinking cheap wine and siesta-ing for six hours a day and then going out to the clubs until 4:00 in the morning. I think there is a toss-up either way, just depends on what your opinion is. You also have experiences here that students who are abroad won't get."

Again, while students in both groups engaged in this kind of social-expectation calculus, it was overwhelmingly the students who chose not to study abroad that indicated a strong preference for being content with their existing friends and valuing their known social experiences over any new or uncertain friendships or socializing.

Involvement in athletics also emerged as a factor influencing men's study abroad decisions although it was difficult to generalize about athletic involvement and study abroad because students indicated strong differences between different

sports and the coaches' expectations about off-season practice and missed seasons. Student athletes pointed out that some teams, such as swimming and cross-country, routinely had athletes, including very successful athletes, who missed part of a season or off-season practice and were still able to compete with no complaints from the coaching staff. Other sports, in particular basketball and football, were discussed as having team cultures that discouraged study abroad. Football players, for example, noted that the large number of men who went out for the team created the perception that losing time, of either a season or off-season practice, meant that a player would be jeopardizing their ability to start or their standing in the depth charts. Basketball players spoke of a team culture that had such rigorous practice expectations, both during and off-season, that even missing spring semester would compromise a player's ability to start.

Two observations are worth noting. First, different sports and teams have their own cultures, and based on this research it seems quite likely that athletes' perceptions are that some teams are more hospitable to study abroad than others. Second, the sports identified as most supportive of study abroad are the sports least closely identified with traditionally hegemonic notions of masculinity, while the sports identified as least supportive of study abroad were the sports most closely identified with hegemonic masculine ideals (strength, power, toughness, aggressiveness, aggression, etc.). This suggests that the socialization of many of our men makes the most closely masculine-identified sports the ones least likely to have students study abroad. During one focus group I specifically asked about athlete expectations, especially given our Division III status, and why missing a season, part of a season, or off-season practice was considered so significant given that all of the men acknowledged they did not expect to have a professional future in their sport. Student responses indicated that their involvement with those teams and their relationships with their teammates were of a much higher importance to them than spending time in a different culture or country. As one student athlete noted, "I only have four years to play both (football and wrestling) so you could travel the last years of your life but you can only play college sports for four or five years." This sentiment was echoed by a football player who noted that "There are 200 students on the football team, that is a decent chunk of the student body, they want to be there on the sidelines. They don't want to be missing it, being 2000 miles away studying." As these, and other, student comments demonstrate, it was not just the competitive implications of missing time that demotivated some athletes, it was also equally about the social implications of missing time and experiences shared with teammates.

The final significant finding to emerge from this project was that the students who were not interested in studying abroad often conflated travel and tourism with studying abroad. Students not interested in studying abroad would frequently discuss how similar opportunities existed either travelling with their family or conceivably travelling after graduation. For these young men, study abroad was the equivalent of backpacking Europe or a family vacation to Cozumel. One student, in explaining his decision to not study abroad, explained "The travel itself, my family

likes to travel, whether that is just visiting a state for a little while and I have been out of the country a few times so I didn't feel I was missing the travel aspect and it was not as important to me to actually live in another country for a couple of months." This sentiment was widely shared among students not studying abroad. In addition, many students saw travel with the school as limiting and full of requirements that they were not interested in. C's comments are illustrative:

My mind turned to, well, I could still travel but not be with my friends, students, classmates at the time but after graduation if I want to go travel, take time off and travel the world, go one place for a week, another for a week, that is possible and easily done. But then you don't have the school aspect of it, pay for credits, you can live wherever you want, you can go wherever you want, you can have your own itinerary or I have known people that will take itineraries of certain study abroad trips that their friends were on that they were interested in and they didn't have the time or money to go on them and then wait a couple years and then go on those same itineraries, see the same stuff, but you don't have to worry about paying for credits or other kids, other people, you are just on your own, doing your own thing. For these students, study abroad is not much more than a group tour, one that restricts their freedom and adds extra expenses and expectations that they would rather not deal with.

In concluding this section, it is worth noting that several of the men, in discussing why they felt the trips were too expensive, were radically uninformed about the costs of study abroad. One Johnnie, for example, in discussing the expense of the Australia program, gave the expense as 30,000, even though the Center for Global Education website listed the cost that year at just under 15,000. Others spoke of confusion about financing options available to them and seemed generally misinformed about the logistics of arranging study abroad. Given that this information is readily available, I have no recommendations on how to address this, aside from making sure that students considering study abroad are given early, clear and repeated exposure to what the basic extra costs would be.

### Groups Worked With

This study was supported, in part, by the Center for Global Education who provided support both in the form of helping to advertise the focus groups, and of providing funds to purchase pizza and beverages for focus group participants. The Gender Studies program provided funds for the bookstore gift-cards that were randomly drawn and awarded to one participant in each study group.

### Recommendations

There are, I believe, several findings that are good news for study abroad at SJU. First, our men are aware of study abroad and even the men who do not plan on studying abroad, have talked about it and thought about it. Since students will only study abroad if they are aware of their options, this level of awareness is impressive and a good groundwork to build from. In addition, students in both groups frequently referred to a form of positive peer pressure surrounding study abroad.



Our male students believe that there is an expectation that one should or will, study abroad. For these students, the decision to not study abroad was just that – a conscious decision that required them to weight the pros and cons of study abroad. The schools have thus nurtured a culture that makes study abroad an experience that almost all students are aware of and that most students feel is an expectation or normalized part of our institutions' college experience. The schools should obviously continue to engage in the promotion and awareness-raising of study abroad to maintain the existing climate.

Another recommendation to emerge out of this study would be to find ways to work with the athletic and coaching staff to find ways to promote and encourage study abroad for our athletes. Given the high rate of student athletic involvement among our men, fostering a climate that not only allowed, but encouraged, student athletes to study abroad would have the potential to raise male involvement in study abroad on these campuses. A logical place to start would be to speak with the coaching staff from teams with high rates of student-athlete study abroad to find out what role they see study abroad contributing to their men, what the implications for their team's athletic performance are, and so forth. In addition, meeting with the coaching staff of other teams to find out what concerns they might have about study abroad's impact on their team's athletic performance is encouraged. Recognizing and addressing these concerns could have the potential to create one more place that encourages and promotes study abroad.

Unfortunately, one of the most significant themes to emerge from this study is also one of the most difficult to address. The correlation between men who are not interested in engaging with other cultures and not interested in studying abroad is undoubtedly the result of years of social influence. Student comments revealed that most students had interactions with somebody from another culture, through classes, residence halls, or athletic teams, but those interactions did not produce other, more voluntary social exchanges. Simply requiring more students to work with or meet students from a different cultural background are unlikely to change a student's desire for these kinds of interactions. It is worth acknowledging, however, that this is speculative. It is entirely possible that creating more opportunities for exchange and dialogue would in turn create more opportunities for students to develop a nascent interest in cultural exchange, and thus possibly study abroad. What these exchanges would look like, what form they would take, and perhaps most importantly, how they could foster an interest and curiosity about cultural difference would warrant careful consideration and study. But the rigor of the relationship between the interest in cultural difference and the interest in study abroad suggests that this could be a potentially powerful way to increase male involvement in study abroad.

Another recommendation to emerge from this study would be to find ways to promote and incentivize the *study* part of study abroad. Students who do not see directed learning as an important part of study abroad, or worse yet, believe that directed learning is an impediment to their experience, are clearly less likely to go

on a study abroad trip. This creates a promising area for future promotions – emphasizing the benefits to *studying* abroad. Differentiating what college trips do and offer from other forms of international travel would have the potential to make more men consider study abroad as an option that is worth the expense. To this end, it is worth noting that few men in the groups that did not study abroad ever discussed potential employment benefits of study abroad. This silence is noteworthy in a series of focus groups such as this one, and suggests that if men were aware of the practical career and employment benefits that study abroad could offer, they might be more willing to study abroad. Promotional materials, orientation sessions, and class visits from CGE staff, should all make clear and direct links between study abroad and career benefits. If students believe that their future employers want someone who has *studied* abroad (not just travelled), they may be more likely to take a study abroad trip.

A final recommendation to emerge from this study is differentiate, for men, the social experiences of study abroad and staying on campus. The repeated tendency for men who did not study abroad to state that they saw no difference between the kinds of experiences they could have abroad versus on campus suggests that many men see study abroad as simply offering different places to drink. Given this, it is not surprising that they would prefer to stay home. If the experiences of study abroad were promoted as unique, as different, as challenging and courageous, more men might consider study abroad. Framing study abroad as healthy risk-taking, for example, might appeal to men looking for adventure without promoting unwanted activities like nightly drinking.

#### Presentation of Findings

Part of the findings have been submitted to the American Men's Studies Association annual conference to be held in April of 2017. The proposed presentation will cover the motivations behind men who were not interested in study abroad. I anticipate receiving notification of acceptance, or not, in early 2017.

I also intend to develop my findings and submit research to the Workshop on Intercultural Skills Enhancement (WISE) annual conference in February of 2018. Given the time available for research presentations at this conference, I would anticipate being able to cover the findings from both sets of focus groups.

Depending on how my findings are received, I will consider finding a publication outlet for my findings sometime during 2018.

Closer to home, I will also be sharing my results with the CSB/SJU Center for Global Education in the spring of 2016. I have spoken with Joe Rogers, the CGE director, who has expressed an interest in hearing the results and setting aside a time to meet and share my findings with the CGE staff.

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<sup>i</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. 2010.

[https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10\\_233.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_233.asp). Accessed 9/12/2016

<sup>ii</sup> Institute of International Education, as cited in Salisbury, Paulsen & Pascarella 2010.