Stacking High-Impact Practices: Structuring Undergraduate Research and Study Abroad through Curricular, Co-Curricular, and Extra-Curricular Activities

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Abstract
High-impact practices, such as study abroad, undergraduate research, and learning communities have been demonstrated to improve student learning, retention rates, and graduation rates. Recent findings suggest that combining high-impact practices may deepen student benefits. This study sought to assess the quality of students’ experiences from participating in an undergraduate research study abroad learning community. This program structured these practices through curricular (coursework), co-curricular (research meetings), and extra-curricular (cultural field trips) activities. This study also analyzed how such a structure affected faculty scholarship. Through interviews and observations, students reported being more engaged with this study abroad location, the research process, and the coursework than they have in other similar experiences that were not stacked. The peer influence of a learning community ensured students who may not have applied themselves as much in class were actively engaged. Students also provided peer mentorship for the research component. This structure showed some promise for increasing faculty scholarship, but modifications to the program are recommended, including building the course offerings around the faculty member’s area of expertise, and building research design training into the coursework.

Undergraduate research and study abroad are documented high-impact practices which create deep learning experiences for students, increase critical thinking, deepen appreciation of diversity and diverse viewpoints, and boost student engagement (Brownell and Swaaner 2009, Waiwaiwo et al. 2016). Stacking these practices shows higher levels of engagement with the study abroad location and deeper learning of the research process (Banks and Gutiérrez 2017). Research has not yet documented the effect of stacking undergraduate research and study abroad on faculty productivity.

Program Design
Students (n=10) enrolled in global social problems, field research (taught by me), and pan-African social movements (taught by a faculty member at the Ghana campus). Excursions included research trips to the W.E.B. DuBois Center and “slave palaces,” and cultural field trips to local markets and natural areas. Students proposed a research project relevant to Ghana or the West African region. Most students designed individual research projects, some collaborated together, and a few worked on projects in my research area.

Data and Methods
Pre- and Post-Survey of intercultural competence and scientific thinking. Items measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “Does Not Describe Me Well”; 5 = “Describes Me Very Well”). Field notebook of observations on student interactions with each other, the local environment, and the research process. Exit interviews with students.

Student Voices
Students did not always see the links between the study abroad and research experiences. One student said, the research “took a significant amount of time out of my study abroad experience, as I spent many hours working on my project, but at the same time I was dedicated and passionate about my topic and spending abroad in my environment helped me make crucial observations.”

Students saw benefits and limitations of working as a cohort. “I think I was less integrated than I would have been without the group. In some ways, having the group was nice and provided a good support system. On the other hand, I felt like I couldn’t really escape from the American bubble.” Another reported that conducting research with a group “made me think about the individuals that lived there in a deeper way.”

Intercultural Competence

Results

Perspective Taking
Openness to Diversity
0.00 1.00 2.00 3.00 4.00 5.00
3.62 3.96 4.11 4.27

Pre-Test  Post-Test

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References:

Discussion
Students showed slight improvement in scientific thinking and intercultural competence. Some students reported being isolated from the study abroad location, while others reported feeling more engaged. Many students reported being frustrated by the research experience, but also found it rewarding. If the courses, field research experiences, and cultural excursions had been better aligned around a common research project linked to my expertise, it is likely the measures above and my research productivity would have had more significant gains.
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