Crowdsourcing to Improve Study Abroad Experiences

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Submitted to: EPS 538 Globalization of Higher Education

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December 15, 2015
Abstract

This paper presents a study performed to find attributes of study abroad programs students are most interested in. It is difficult to know what to expect from a study abroad program due to limited access to the large number of students who went through a particular study abroad program. Crowdsourcing this information will bridge the gap and provide access to the experiences of students who already went through a particular program. Obtaining structured responses or feedback from past study abroad students is desired with the aim of providing future students with a comprehensive review of a study abroad program. The findings in our study shows the most interested attributes from several categories in a study abroad program. Using these structured findings a crowdsourcing platform can be built to address attributes potential students are most interest in. The paper concludes with preferable ways in obtaining feedback from past study abroad students so their feedback include the most sought after information.

Keywords: Crowdsourcing, study abroad, globalization, higher education, student exchange, student mobility
Crowdsourcing to Improve Study Abroad Experiences

Studies show that study abroad has a significant impact on students in the areas of continued language use, academic attainment measures, intercultural and personal development, and career choices. Even so, the impact of these experiences can be sustained over a period as long as 50 years (Dwyer, 2004). Students’ think the most important benefit from studying overseas was the exposure it would provide to a different culture and language (Doyle et al. 2010).

According to a recent study (Doyle et al. 2010) that investigates the factors associated with student participation in study abroad, a main factor that has deterred students from studying abroad is the awareness and knowledge of exchange programs. In addition, the cost of studying overseas was identified as an important obstacle. The study reports the most important facilitators- perceived by students- that may increase the attractiveness of exchange programs. The top three facilitators reported were- being eligible for a scholarship, going overseas with a group of students, and being able to work part-time overseas (Doyle et al. 2010). Another study (Talburt & Stewart, 1999) reports race and ethnic concerns during study abroad have also being “overtly problematized which suggest that study abroad curricula incorporate sustained discussion of students’ sociocultural differences and resulting particularities in their experiences in the host culture as part of the formal curriculum” (p. 1).

It is important to know of past students’ experiences of a particular study abroad program or destination. The experiences may be used to provide future study abroad students with information on the demography of a study abroad destination. Such experiences may also include the load and pressure of coursework in the study abroad destination. As well as, the daily
activities in host university to allow them adjust to the culture. The aim of this paper was to find the most sought after attributes, by students, of a study abroad destination. A survey containing several grouped attributes under 4 major categories (Financial Planning, Health and Insurance, Safety and Well-being, and Cross-Cultural Information) was conducted in this paper; the findings are presented in the discussion section.

After realizing the most sought after attributes by students, it is difficult to acquire sufficient information (or feedback) on the different attributes of study abroad programs. This is due to the cost and time taken to obtain such feedback. To address this problem, we propose a crowdsourcing platform. A crowdsourcing platform can be used to collect sufficient sample data from students in a cost effective and timely manner (Kittur, 2008). The sample data is the feedback provided of which contains information of students’ experiences during a study abroad program. Brabham (2009) describes crowdsourcing as “a new web-based business model that harnesses the creative solutions of a distributed network of individuals through what amounts to an open call for proposals” (p. 76). Crowdsourcing has been applied to many fields to help alleviate problems faced in obtaining information or feedback (Brabham, 2008) e.g students crowdsource information about what to expect from a professor teaching a class (Silva, 2008), user-interface design workers crowdsource feedback for their designs (Luther, Tolentino, Wu, Pavel et al., 2015), and companies crowdsource data about restaurants (Hicks, 2012).

As seen in Figure 1, crowdsourcing can bridge the gap between future and past study abroad students and provide access to the experiences of students who already went through a particular study abroad program. Structuring the crowdsourced data is important as they are been obtained from non-experts (past study abroad students) and presented to non-experts (future
study abroad students). We suggest ways to structure the collection of the data without the need for expert intervention. In this paper we present the attributes students are most interested in and also preferable ways to structure the collection of the such data from past study abroad students.

In essence, many students study abroad every year, have different experiences and would not mind passing such experiences to future students. Future students would like to obtain such information from past study abroad students. A crowdsourcing platform can bridge the gap between both parties. This paper presents the most sought after attribute(s) of a study abroad program and preferable ways of obtaining structured feedback containing the sought after attributes to provide future students with comprehensive information of past study abroad experiences. An anonymous survey was sent out to address the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** What are the most sought after attribute(s) by students within each category?
  - **RQ1.1:** What are the most sought after category(-ies) by students?
- **RQ2:** What are the least understandable attribute(s) by students?
Method

An anonymous survey was sent out to 28 students in the College of Engineering from University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 18 of these students participated in our study. Of these participants, 11 were male and 7 were female students. The survey included 13 undergraduate students (4 freshman, 4 sophomores, 3 juniors, and 2 seniors), and 5 graduate students (2 masters students, and 3 PhD students). The survey included 4 categories- Financial Planning, Health and Insurance, Safety and Well-being, and Cross-Cultural Information- as well as its corresponding list of attributes. Participants were allowed to make none or multiple attribute selection in the survey. Participants were given an optional textbox to fill-in any unclear attribute, thereby providing us with feedback on the survey taken. The major purpose of this study was to get a quick response from a group of students who have some study abroad experiences and those who are have an interest in studying abroad. Although the study sample cannot be considered representative of the original population of interest, generalizability was not a primary goal.

Results

Below I describe the responses about the sought after attributes within the 4 major categories - Financial Planning, Health and Insurance, Safety and Well-being, and Cross-Cultural Information (See Appendix A for more information on the break-down of percentage of students interested for the different attributes and categories).

Financial Planning. Four attributes under this category were presented in the survey. The different attributes were Cost of Program, Cost of Living in Study Abroad Destination, Financial Aid, and Withdrawal and Refund Policy. 83% of responses emphasized the Cost of Program as
an important attribute, making it the most sought after information within this category (RQ1). Cost of Living was the next important attribute with 72% of responses expressing interest in the attribute. Financial Aid received 61%, and Withdrawal and Refund Policy received 11%, marking it as less relevant information before studying abroad. The average percentage of this category was 57%.

**Health and Insurance.** Three attributes included in this category are Preventative Health Care, Destinations Healthcare Cost, and Health Care Insurance for Study Abroad. Although the attributes are different, many students had unclear definitions of the attributes (RQ2). Each attribute received almost equal percentage of interest, as the survey reported 44%, 44%, and 66% respectively (RQ1). The average percentage of this category was 52%.

**Safety and Well-being.** All three attributes in this category received high interest percentage figures. As 72% of responses included Political tensions/stability of destination, 61% included Discrimination and Sexual Harassment, and 67% included Racial and Ethnic Concerns, making it the most important attribute (RQ1). Overall, with 67%, the average of the 3 attributes makes it the category with the most sought after attributes (RQ1.1).

**Cross-Cultural Information.** This category contained the most number of attributes. They are Weather, Fashion, Food, Housing, Academics, Day to Day Activities, Sports, and Cultural artifacts/offerings. 83% of responses expressed interest in Cultural artifacts/offerings, and a mere 28% were interested in Fashion. Weather and Housing were sought after by 61% of responders, Academics, Day to Day Activities, and Cultural Artifact were all sought after by 67% of responders. Sports attribute was sought after by 55% of responders. (RQ1). The average percentage of this category was 61%.
Discussion

After analysis on the responses about the most sought after attributes for the 5 major categories about study abroad program, we created a list of feedbacks that should be crowdsourced in order to attain the information from past study abroad students’ experiences. The feedback that should be requested from past study abroad students should contain the following discussed below.

The requested feedback from past study abroad students should include the cost of a particular study abroad program, and the destinations cost of living. Our results support Doyle’s (2010) finding that cost of living is a main factor that deters students from studying abroad, as 83% of students in our study are interested in learning about the cost of living of the study abroad destination. 72% of students were interested in the cost of the study abroad program. The second category was Health and Insurance. It turns out most students don’t understand the implications of health care cost during their time in the study abroad program, as 73% of survey respondents noted that they need a more details on category. A clear definition for all 3 attributes - Preventative Health Care, Destinations Healthcare Cost, and Health Care Insurance for Study Abroad - should also be included for both past and future study abroad students.

Safety and well-being is the most important category based on the responses in our survey. It is the most sought after information, so it is important that the feedback requested from past students address all 3 attributes of this category, namely, Political tensions/stability of destination, Discrimination and Sexual Harassment, and Racial and Ethnic Concerns. Racial and Ethnic Concerns was acknowledged by Talburt (1999) in previous studies. Our result supports
the study, as it is the most sought after attribute when compared to all attributes under every category.

The majority of cross-cultural attributes are sought after by all students, although each student tend to varying and diverse attributes they are most interested in. Therefore, organizing the different cross cultural information and presenting all necessary attributes are important. Fashion is the only attribute students did not find interesting. The result of the survey failed to support the study by Doyle (2010) of which is described in the introduction section. The study performed by Doyle (2010) mentions that students perceived the most important benefit of studying abroad as the exposure to a different culture and language. Our survey reported that only a mere 61% of students find it important to know about the culture of a destination before studying abroad. This may be because of the broad category culture and language falls into. Within our survey, Cross-Cultural Information included too many attributes i.e Weather, Fashion, Food, Housing, Academics, Day to Day Activities, Sports, and Cultural artifacts/offerings. “Day to Day Activities” was described by three participants as “vague” in our survey. In addition the category does not include the Language attribute.

The web provides the means for individuals around the globe to commune in a single environment (Terranova, 2004). Brabham (2008) further emphasizes the effectiveness of crowdsourcing platforms- “Given that users spread throughout a geographical terrain, among a variety of cultural backgrounds, the web can facilitate the exchange of diverse opinions, independent of each other, in a decentralized way” (p. 81). A website with a section that can be used to provide the feedback and a different section to view the already collected and aggregated feedback can be used in crowdsourcing the information. By crowdsourcing we obtain the data
from a diverse group of people as a representation of the population (Brabham, 2008). We may improve the quality of feedback through different ways.

1. Motivation

   a. Intrinsic: The crowdsourcing platform can be used to intrinsically motivate past students by informing them of the importance of providing feedback. Another way to intrinsically motivate past students is by making the feedback part of the study abroad program or a class (Kaufmann, 2011).

   b. Extrinsic: The crowdsourcing platform may pay students for giving feedback on a study abroad program (Kaufmann, 2011).

2. Providing prompts or scaffold: They serve to guide or train a past student on specific feedback that should be provided (Wade, Salahat & Wilson, 2012).

3. Rating Feedback: Students may rate the quality of a feedback, and the crowdsourcing platform may remove or downvote bad ones.

4. Filtering: Filter students with initial survey questions by their expertise or interests to get to learn more on the qualifications of the students e.g a crowdsourcing platform may require that only students who spent at least 3 months studying abroad may provide feedback.

5. Priming: Research has shown that temporary priming effects can lead to significant improvement in feedback quality. An example of priming is by suggesting previous examples to feedback givers so those examples serve as primers e.g example of good response, example of a good feedback (Morris, 2012).
This way the crowdsourcing platform can help receive comprehensive feedback from the previously describe attributes from the different categories.

**Limitations and Future Work**

In addition to using crowdsourcing platforms to learn about a study abroad program, students may also need to speak to representatives to ensure that their personal and career investment (by studying abroad) will lead to a positive impact. Although this paper presented crowdsourcing as a platform to provide student information, it is also necessary for representatives to discuss the programs personally with the students. Well-known crowdsourcing platforms (e.g. yelp.com) do not require such investment. For example, customers spend only about 30 minutes in a restaurant, as opposed to studying abroad- which ranges from a few weeks to months or years. In addition, students study abroad with the intention of enriching their professional career (or personal lives). The proposed crowdsourcing platform is similar to viewing college reviews online before enrolling. Even after students view college reviews, they may also visit the respective college campuses or talk to a representative. We advise students do the same, and speak to representatives of different study abroad programs (or attend information sessions of a particular study abroad program).

The study sample size (of 18 students) cannot be considered representative of the original population of interest, generalizability was not a primary goal. A future work will be to increase the sample size, and also request for more demographical information from participants e.g race, location, and age. The survey did not gauge the sought after attributes based on the future students location and interests. A future work will be to include such pre-condition to the survey
and analyze the result based on the future students location i.e students from United States may typically seek a different set of attributes than students from India.

**Conclusion**

It is difficult to know what to expect from a study abroad program due to limited access to the large number of students who went through a particular study abroad program. Crowdsourcing this information will bridge the gap and provide access to the experiences of students who already went through a particular program. It has been applied to several other fields. Obtaining structured feedback from those students is desired and will provide future students with a comprehensive review of a study abroad program. This paper presented the important sought after attributes by students from study abroad program and suggested ways to obtain structure feedback which contains the sought after attributes.
References

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Appendix A

Break-down of Percentage of Students Interested in Each Attribute