

# **Assessing Study Abroad Programs at U.S. Research Universities: A Social Systems Study**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Internationalization of higher education requires extensive institutional support and strategic coordination of key activities. This study examines internationalization of higher education institutions through the lens of study abroad programs coordinated by the centralized Offices of International Programs at American research universities. Using a social systems paradigm, it assesses whether significant relationships exist between institutional input, the process of coordination, and the output of these programs. The key factors were management of human resources, the number of exchange programs, and the number of study abroad programs.**

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## **Introduction**

The major challenge confronting the internalization of American universities is the low level of institutional commitment to globalizing the campus. Most institutions have not developed strategic plans to meet this objective and less than three percent of undergraduate students have had opportunities to study abroad by the time they graduate. At the same time, participation in study abroad programs tend to be white, female, middle class, full-time students, majoring in foreign languages, history, and the social sciences at liberal arts colleges (Lambert, 1995; Siaya & Hayward, 2003).

To meet these fundamental challenges, Knight (1994) defined a process approach to integrate an international and intercultural dimension into the overall functions of teaching research, and service. Further, de Wit (2002) urged U.S. higher education to

adopt the process approach into studies and practices of internationalization to promote international competency and enhance institutions' capacity to gain global competitiveness.

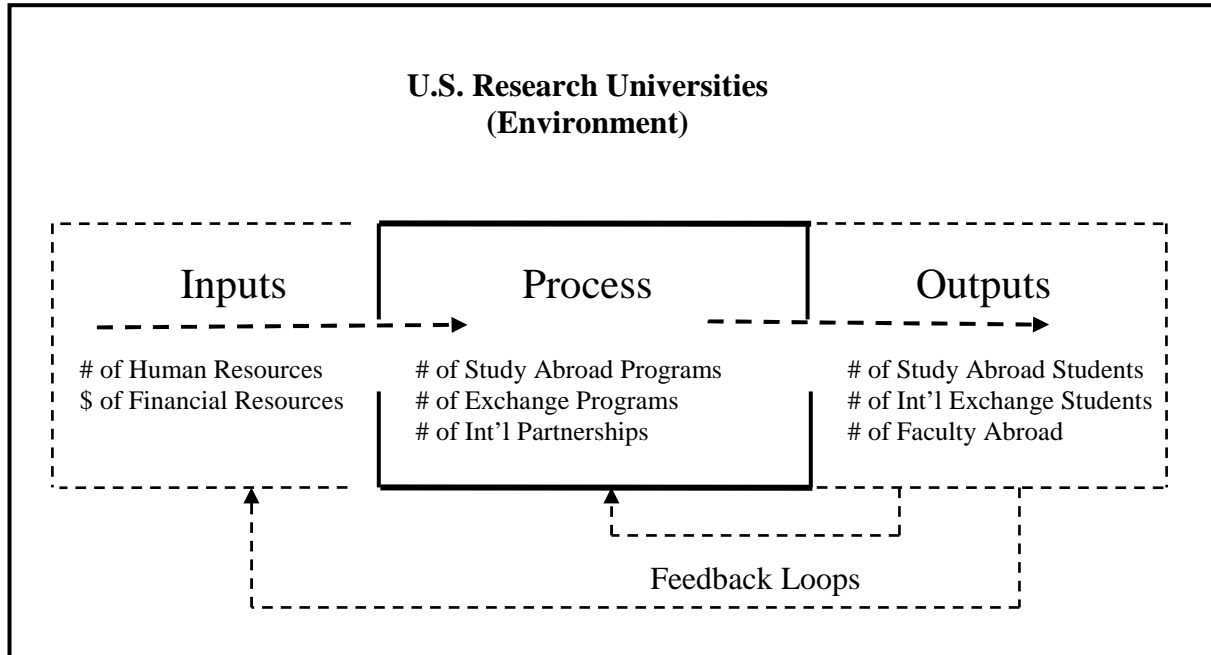
### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to assess study abroad programs coordinated by the centralized Offices of International Programs (OIPs) at U.S. research universities by using a modified social systems model. It assesses whether there are significant relationships existing among (1) institutional commitment to internationalization of higher education through input of human resources and financial resources to the study abroad programs, (2) the process of establishment and coordination of study abroad programs and related activities by the centralized OIP, and (3) the output of study abroad programs at U.S. research universities.

### **Social Systems Model**

A higher education institution can be conceptualized as a living, open social system. The systems-environment model developed by Hoy & Miskel (1996) focuses on the relationships between the system and its environment. Within the boundaries of the environment, the system receives input from the environment, transforms the input to the output through the process of operation, and finally sends the output back into the environment. Input refers to everything that the system receives from its environment, including people, raw materials, information, resources, energies, and finances; the output consists of products and services generated by the system, as well as employee satisfaction and other by products (Banathy, 1973). The output enables the system to meet the expectations, requirements, and demands of its environment.

On the basis of this paradigm, a modified social systems-environmental model was developed for this study (see Figure 1). Accordingly, the goal is to prepare "globally educated graduates" in the form of increasing numbers of students studying abroad, incoming international exchange students, and faculty abroad. To fulfill these expectations, the central administration inputs human, financial, and physical resources to its subsystem—the OIP; the OIP transforms these inputs into the process of administering and coordinating study abroad and exchange programs; finally the OIP increases the numbers of students and faculty abroad to meet the expectations of the institution.



*Figure 1. Modified Social Systems-Environment Model*

### Population

The population consists of 282 U.S. research universities with three subgroups drawn from the Carnegie Classifications: very high research universities, high research universities, and doctoral research universities. Among this subset, 58.9 percent of research universities are public institutions and 41.1 percent of research universities are private institutions. Those institutions lacking of information regarding study abroad offices were eliminated, reducing the size of the study to 230 institutions. Survey questionnaires were received from 93 directors of the OIPs representing a response rate of 40.4 percent.

### Research Variables

Predictor variables included human resources (HR), financial resources (FR), the number of study abroad programs (NSAProg), the number of exchange programs (NEXProg), and the number of international partnerships (NPartner); the outcome variables were the number of study abroad students (NSAStu), the number of international exchange students (NEXStu), and the number of faculty abroad (NFac). Because four variables had missing data in excess of 5 percent and all variables were positively skewed, SPSS missing value analysis and data transformation were applied to ensure the normal distribution. Moreover, standard multiple regression analysis was employed to establish the regression models.

## Findings

Research question I measures whether the institutional input variables and the process variables significantly related to the outcome variable of the number of study abroad students. The findings show that the most significant predictor to estimate the number of students studying abroad was human resources ( $\beta = .51, p < .001$ ), followed by financial resources ( $\beta = .24, p < .01$ ) and the number of study abroad programs ( $\beta = .20, p < .05$ ), respectively.

Research Question II examines whether the institutional input and process variables are significantly related to the outcome variable of the number of international exchange students. The findings indicate that the most significant predictor was the number of exchange programs ( $\beta = .65, p < .001$ ), followed by the number of international partnerships ( $\beta = .28, p < .01$ ).

Research question III probes whether the institutional input and process variables are significantly related to the outcome variable of the number of faculty abroad. The findings show that the most significant predictor to estimate the number of faculty abroad was the number of study abroad programs ( $\beta = .53, p < .001$ ), followed by human resources ( $\beta = .20, p < .05$ ).

## Discussion

### *Human Resources*

The study found that an average of 6.35 FTE staff work for study abroad programs and 62.3 percent of staff are engaged as professional practitioners. Although no previous studies have detected whether the number of FTE staff working for study abroad programs significantly associated with the increase of the number of students and faculty participating in study abroad programs, this study indicates that a properly staffed OIP, especially study abroad directors, professional program coordinators and study abroad advisors, plays a critical role to encourage students and faculty abroad.

With more professional staff, students may spend more time to work with them for collecting the information about study abroad programs, locating a desired place for cultural immersion, fulfilling the graduation requirement, solving financial issues, and so forth. On the other hand, more staff also means that the OIP may have more opportunities to reach the targeted students and use a variety of strategies to attract those students, such as study abroad fairs, study abroad posters, fliers, and e-letters, classroom visits, study abroad information sessions/tables, and the social networking (e.g., Facebook & Blog).

In addition, administrative work of managing study abroad programs is very time-consuming. Faculty members are experts in academic fields concentrating on teaching and research, not on administration. Professional staff who help faculty design a study abroad program, manage a trip, and manage the budget would reduce the burden for faculty. Moreover, hiring more the professional staffs allows the OIP to provide more training and workshops for faculty development in international dimension, to seek grants and contracts to support those faculty members who would like to internationalize

curriculum and instruction, to lead students studying abroad, to conduct research with their international partners, to attend international conferences and meetings, and to provide public service and consultations to developing countries.

### *Financial Resources*

The second significant predictor to estimate the number of study abroad students is financial resources. The findings show that average of \$947.21 thousand dollars of the annual budget is managed by the OIP and used for study abroad programs at research universities; among them, slightly more than 50 percent of the annual budget came from fees generated by students who participated in study abroad programs and 40 percent of the annual budget was allocated from the central funds.

The results are strongly supported by Nelson's (1995) study that the percentage of the operating budget for study abroad programs allocated from the central funds and the percentage of operating budget supported by fees generated from students who participated in study abroad had significant relationships with institutional success in sending students to study abroad at large public institutions. Institutions that substantial external funding source would more successful in this regard. Thus, actively seeking external funding to support study abroad programs becomes an effective strategy for the OIPs to dedicate their efforts for advancing internationalization (Green, 2005).

### *Number of Study Abroad Programs*

The number of study abroad programs is significantly related not only to the number of study abroad students, but also to the number of faculty abroad. This suggests that the number of faculty abroad is somehow associated with the increase of the number of students studying abroad through faculty-led programs. The finding is supported by Nelson's (1995) study that large institutions obtained significant relationships between the number of study abroad programs coordinated by the OIPs and institutional success in sending students studying abroad.

Faculty involvement is vital to cultivating effective study abroad programs. Currently, slightly more than half of U.S. students have studied abroad through summer programs or spring breaks. Typically, faculty-led study abroad programs are led by a faculty member and often combined with an existing class taught by the leading faculty. This arrangement is easier to fit for students' needs and schedules, specifically for those part-time students or non-traditional students who need to work regularly to pay for their tuition and living for participating in higher education. This may explain why faculty-led study abroad programs have increased dramatically and students who attended faculty-led programs have become the fastest growing cohort in recent decade (IIE, 2007).

### ***Number of Exchange Programs and International Partnerships***

Besides study abroad programs, exchange programs and international partnerships are another vital dimension of internationalization. The findings show that only the number of exchange programs and the number of international partnerships are significantly associated with increasing the number of exchange students; moreover, an average of 24.44 exchange programs was administered by OIPs and an average of 42.51 international students studied at U.S. research universities through exchange programs.

Currently, most research universities host a small number of exchange programs through their international partners. The most successful programs ensure that tuition and room and board students paid at home institutions are comparable to the expenses encountered at foreign institutions. Also the host institutions should be carefully and matched with the home institution, both academically and culturally. Lastly, exchange students need more opportunities to immerse themselves into a foreign culture through international residence halls programs, “buddy” programs, and language-partner programs as a prelude to traveling abroad.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Firstly, a properly staffed OIP is essential to providing the basic information, service, coordination, leadership, and strategic initiatives to promote students and faculty participating in study abroad programs and further increase the number of students and faculty members abroad.

Secondly, establishment of a variety of faculty-led programs to encourage faculty members from different academic fields participating in study abroad programs would increase the number of students studying abroad. Thus, one of the best practices for enhancing internationalization is to work closely with faculty members and design a variety of faculty-led study abroad programs in different academic fields to satisfy students' needs.

Thirdly, well-selected and well-matched international partnerships and exchange programs would increase the number of international students studying at U.S. colleges and universities through exchange programs. However, the OIP directors should keep in mind that the number of study abroad programs had a small negative influence on the number of exchange students; thus, balancing these two types of programs to fit different students' needs is an art of administration.

Fourthly, the annual OIP budget, including fees generated from students who studies abroad and the central allocation of funds, should be optimized. Since many universities have suffered budget reductions, seeking external funding from private organizations, federal, and state government may become indispensable for supporting students and faculty abroad.

### Recommendations for Future Study

1. Replicate the study with a larger sample size to assess the significant contribution of individual predictor variables.
2. Replicate this study in liberal art colleges by using the same predictor variables and the outcome variables to see whether different patterns would appear.

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