STUDY ABROAD LEARNING OUTCOMES

In spring 2013, members of the Committee on International Education were joined by other faculty, staff, and students for a workshop to evaluate what students are learning when they study abroad. Russ Cannon (Institutional Research) helped facilitate the session. Workshop participants used rubrics adapted from the AAC&U’s LEAP Initiative to analyze sets of reflective essays written by students following their study abroad experiences.

The essay prompts:

1. What were your original learning goals for study abroad? How did they change?
2. What conditions and actions by you and others influenced your ability to achieve the goals?
3. How did your learning abroad intersect with your studies at Beloit College, past and future?
4. Discuss experiences abroad, small or large, which were especially meaningful and memorable. Explain why and how these will have a lasting effect on you.
5. How did your experiences abroad, including others’ perceptions of you, impact how you think about yourself and your relationship to society?
6. In three sentences or fewer, how would you describe your study abroad experience to a future employer or graduate school admissions office

Two kinds of learning outcomes were assessed:

- the development of life-long learning skills (ability to transfer knowledge and skills from one situation to another, reflect on multiple interrelated factors in past and future, and understand one’s own as well as others’ roles in learning)
- intercultural development (cultural self-knowledge, knowledge of other cultural frameworks)

Each set of essays was evaluated using scores from 0 (low) to 3 (high) for each rubric sub-category. Very few scores of 3 for any of the sub-essays were assigned. At the other extreme, some essay sets received all 0s, or 0s and an occasional 1 across the rubric sub-categories, when students simply did not invest in the reflective exercise.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Transfer</th>
<th>Reflection</th>
<th>Ownership</th>
<th>Cultural Self-Knowledge</th>
<th>Other’s Cultural Frameworks</th>
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<td>1.175</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>.858</td>
<td>.6</td>
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</table>

Scores were highest for ownership (multiple interrelated factors in past and future), closely followed by reflection (recognition of the student’s and others’ roles in learning, strategizing to achieve goals), and then transfer (of skills, abilities, theories, or methodologies from one context to another). Consistent with findings in some of the literature on study abroad learning outcomes, scores for intercultural knowledge
and competence were lowest. Evidence of cultural self-knowledge was higher than knowledge of cultural world frameworks, an unsurprising finding given the tendency of travel, sojourns, and study abroad to teach one about oneself.

As Beloit College offers a variety of study abroad opportunities, an analysis was undertaken by program type (exchange, visiting student/direct enrollment, provider) to see if the outcomes differed. Differences were indeed found, with scores for transfer distinctly higher for exchange and visiting students than students enrolled in provider programs, and scores for reflection highest among exchange students. Scores for ownership, however, were higher for students enrolled in provider programs. No significant differences were found in scores for intercultural knowledge and competence.

In addition to findings suggested by the scores, what came through in the analysis were the stories the students were telling about their experiences abroad. While the ways in which these emerged differed (some students engaged more deeply with a particular prompt than others), the 4th prompt in particular about an “impactful experience” allowed students to be selective and specific in their responses and to articulate where and how the learning had taken place. This was satisfying, as one of our objectives in approaching the assessment of learning outcomes was to use a method that would benefit the students themselves, while also giving the college information to guide practice.

On the basis of the findings, two questions on the study abroad application were simplified, and more attention is being paid in advising about study abroad to cultivating critical reflection and connection-making.