

Trends

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Study Abroad

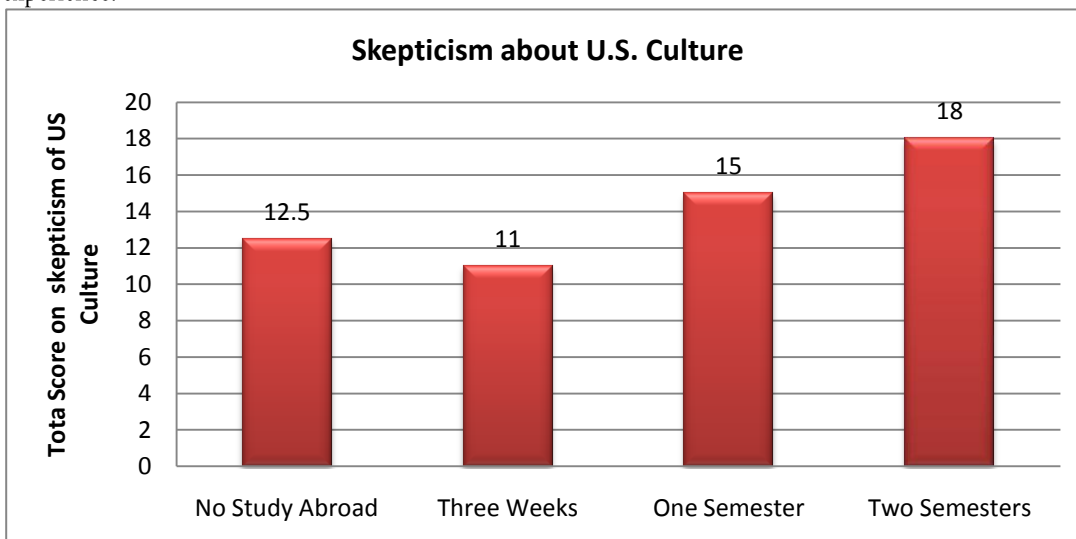
Study abroad at CSB and SJU is a signature program with more than half of each graduating class participating in a study abroad program.

Both institutions were recognized for their outstanding study abroad programs in the most recent rankings of colleges and universities appearing in *U.S. News and World Report* magazine. Furthermore, the Institute of International Education has consistently rated CSB and SJU as top schools for study abroad in their Open Doors report. The 2008 report had both institutions ranked No. 2 nationally among baccalaureate institutions with students who participate in semester-long study abroad programs. The report also found that CSB and SJU ranked No. 5 nationally among baccalaureate institutions for total number of study abroad students, with 495 students who studied abroad in 2006-07.

Laura Turkowski (CSB '08) studied abroad in France in 2006. When she returned to the United States, she had questions about the impact of her experience. Specifically, she wanted to investigate the impact of study abroad on relationships between significant others. To help answer this and other questions, she collaborated with her advisor and professor of psychology Dr. Richard Wielkiewicz, and together they designed a research study that was administered online. Surveys were completed by 669 students at CSB and SJU. The percentage of students who had studied abroad was 36.2 percent (239 students). Most of those who had studied abroad (82.4 percent) had done so during their third year of college. The six main findings, to be published in the *Journal of College Student Development*, are summarized below:

Statistical analyses showed that spending at least a semester abroad was related to a significantly more skeptical view of American culture, also known as "reentry shock."

To measure reentry shock, students indicated their level of agreement with four statements reflecting conflict or skepticism with the values and beliefs of American culture. Students who had studied abroad were divided into those who had studied abroad for three weeks or less and those who had remained abroad for an entire semester or longer. Although there was some evidence of a trend related to year in college, an increase in reentry shock scores was mainly associated with the length of the study abroad experience.



Note: Differences between students that participated in short-term (3 weeks) study abroad and long-term study abroad (one and two semesters) were statistically significant.

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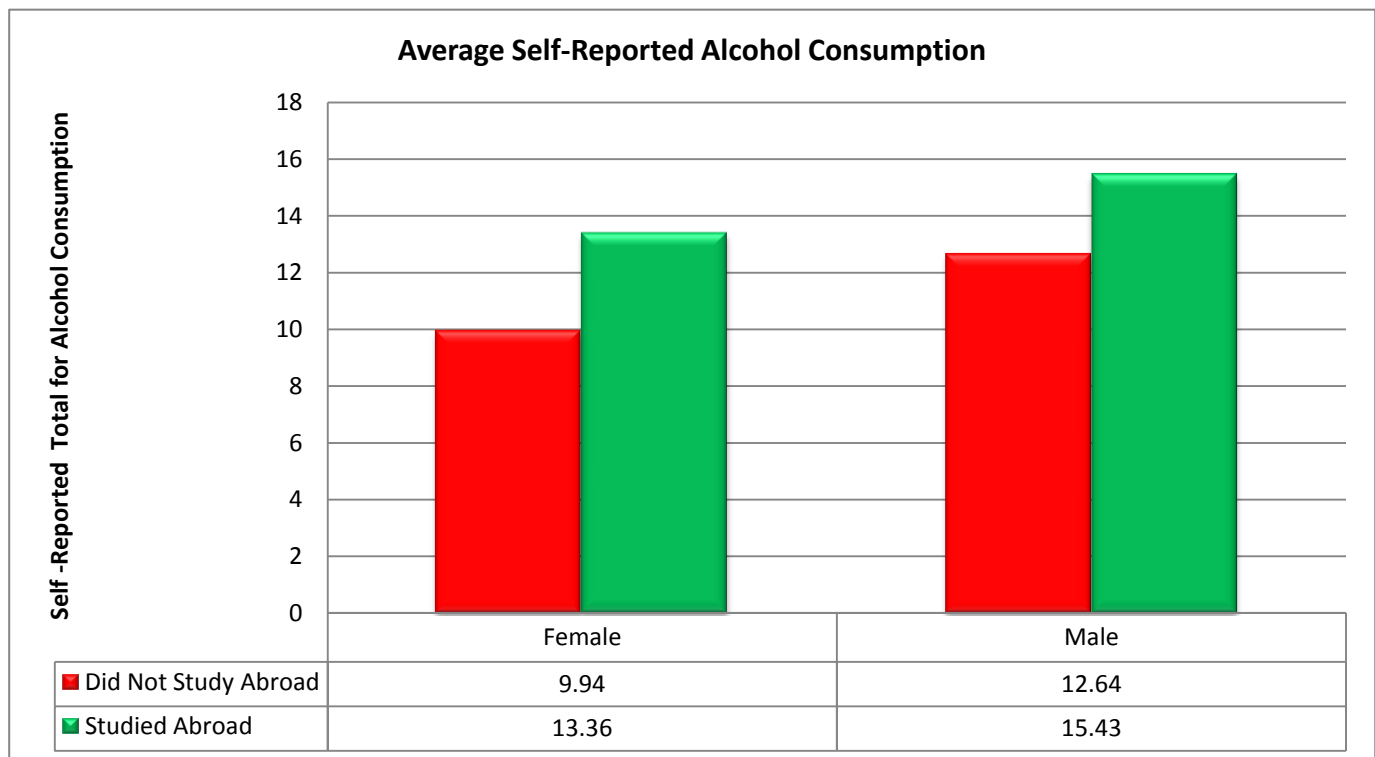
Skepticism about the home culture can be interpreted as individuals who had become more culturally competent and able to see their own culture in a larger context. The results also suggest that a semester or more abroad may be necessary to obtain these effects. It is interesting to note that the scores were reversed for students that studied abroad for three weeks. These students reported lower skepticism or conflict when compared to those that did not study abroad at all. One possible explanation is that a shorter study abroad experience is more tourist-like so the student does not become immersed in the host culture and does not acquire the knowledge and experience needed to compare and contrast their home culture to a host culture.

Studying abroad does not negatively affect relationships with a significant other. Data showed that 65 percent of those who had a significant other before going abroad remained with them after returning home while another 14 percent reported gaining a significant other while abroad.

Wang (1997) and other researchers have found that personal relationships are negatively affected by study abroad. In fact, Wang stated that romantic relationships “almost never” survive a sojourn. Our study did not find significant differences between the study abroad group and non-study abroad group in mean scores on several scales designed to measure the quality of relationships with significant others. Therefore, study abroad did not contribute to deterioration of romantic or other relationships. Many students who sojourn are able to maintain contacts with home via cell phones and the Internet. Perhaps the availability of electronic means of communication offsets the disadvantages of physical separation that existed decades ago.

One of the largest differences between those who studied abroad and those who did not was in the extent of self-reported alcohol use. Those who had studied abroad in college had higher alcohol consumption than those who did not.

One interpretation is that students who have studied abroad are older and more inclined to report alcohol consumption. However, with age and gender statistically controlled, those who had studied abroad in college still reported more alcohol consumption than those who had not. A related finding was that group cohesiveness was positively related to alcohol consumption for those who studied abroad. Most important is the fact that the vast majority of college students who study abroad are above the legal age for alcohol consumption almost every where in the world (18 years). Alcohol consumption might also be a vehicle for group cohesiveness and exploring the local culture. Drinking habits that began or intensified while abroad might continue upon reentry into the home culture.



Note: Differences were statistically different between students who studied abroad versus those that did not.

The Brief Screen for Depression and a scale of Negative Emotions did not differ for those who studied abroad versus those who did not. Numerous other analyses failed to indicate any relationship of a study abroad experience to emotional distress.

Many question whether emotional distress is associated with return from a trip as predicted by the scientific literature on reentry shock.

Those who studied abroad had a stronger tendency to agree with the statement, “My courses and work load (homework) have increased this semester” than those that did not study abroad.

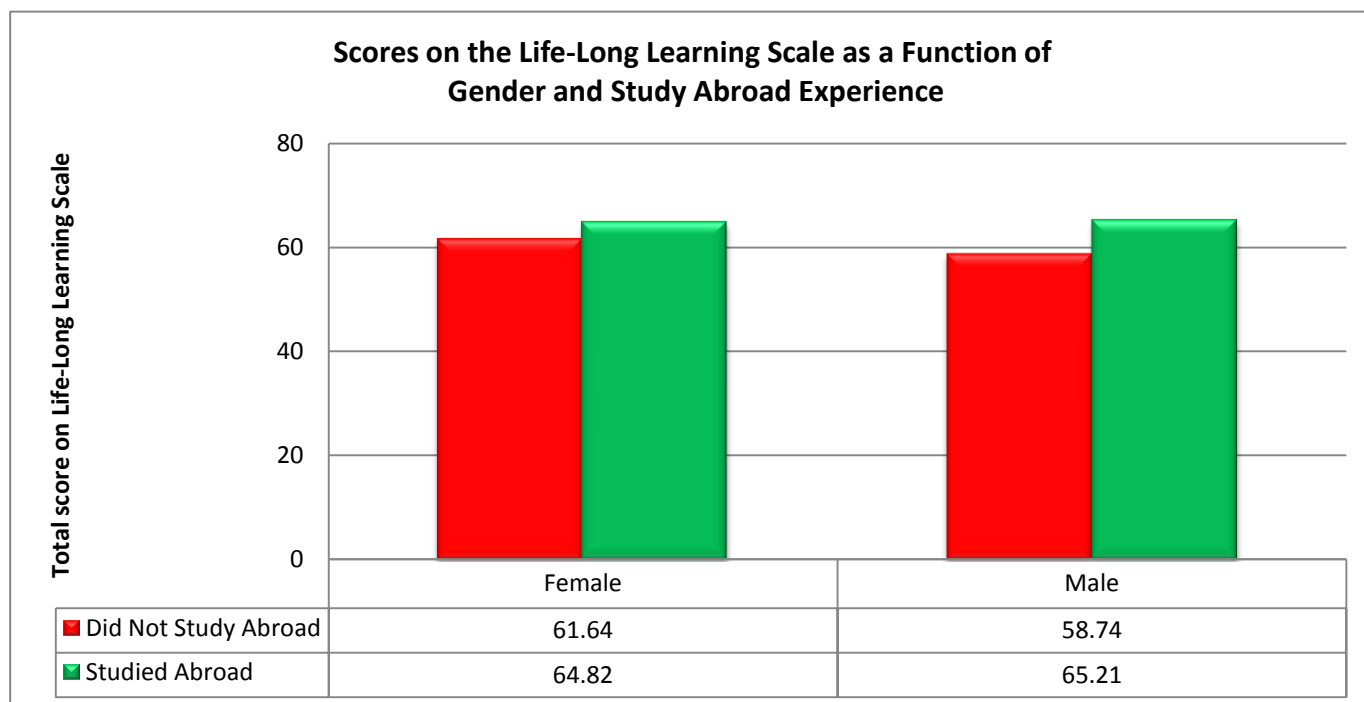
A follow-up analysis indicated that students were less likely to endorse this statement the further away they moved from their study abroad experience, with students who had most recently returned from their sojourn providing the strongest endorsements. This finding is consistent with other researchers who have found that some students reported negative changes in study habits while abroad.

This might be the result of less academically rigorous programs while abroad contrasted with more rigorous workloads upon return.

The prevalence of large lecture sections and dependence upon final exams typical of European higher education might also contrast with the active learning approaches typical of CSB and SJU’s liberal arts education. Furthermore, a study abroad experience naturally leaves room for exploring local culture and travel which might further downgrade the perception of the academic rigor of the experience. One possible explanation is that the appearance of less academic rigor combined with encouragement to explore the local culture might be a contributor to alcohol consumption that continues upon returning from the sojourn.

Students who participate show much stronger habits of life-long learning than those who do not.

A 16-item scale measuring the construction of Life-Long Learning has been developed by Wielkiewicz. The Life-Long Learning scale measures the extent to which a person’s behavior reflects positive attitudes toward learning, curiosity and critical thinking. The scale was administered to 575 students from CSB and SJU. The mean score for students who had completed a full semester abroad was found to be a half standard deviation greater than those who had not. This statistically significant difference supports the hypothesis that students who study abroad for at least a full semester tend to score higher on life-long learning. This finding is consistent with the signature status of the study abroad program. It also appeared that these effects are stronger for men than women.



Note: Differences between students that studied abroad versus those that did not were statistically different and were more pronounced for men when compared to women.

For more information regarding this study and other related issues, please contact Richard Wielkiewicz, PhD at rwielk@csbsju.edu.