

## International Study and Transformational Learning: What Covid-19 Has Taught Us

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**Abstract:** Studying abroad in and of itself should be a unique and transformational learning experience for university students. Too often, “study abroad” is a code word for “faculty vacation” or “easy credit hours”. For an international learning experience to be truly transformational it must offer an intense and directed program that maximizes the time the student spends in the accumulation of information that is new or different from what the student has “learned” previously. “Study abroad” may be a misnomer because it is not only about *studying* in another country or culture, that is, taking courses that usually have an attendance time of a few hours a week, but it is also about *living* in another country which becomes a 24/7 learning experience. Providing these programs during the Covid-19 pandemic has been a keen opportunity for institutional learning. When this immersion in foreign culture is combined with academic rigor applied to a student’s chosen field of study the growth can be exponential. So, what is the relationship between academic and personal growth? The National Association for Study Abroad has found that “students who have studied abroad are better able to work with people from other countries, understand the complexity of global issues, and have greater intercultural learning. One study found that students returned from their study abroad experiences more tolerant and less fearful of other countries, but with a greater sense of nationalism—a phenomenon they called ‘enlightened nationalism’.”<sup>2</sup> It is often said that “you only really learn to appreciate things that are important to you when they are gone, when you miss them.” The international learning environment can provide this opportunity. The restrictions on various societies in the past two years due to the international Covid pandemic have provided existing study abroad programs with a true testing ground for the validity of their programs. At the end of the day, American colleges and universities are not helpless in the face of these developments. A lot depends on how a university positions itself for a future based on the uncertainties of the past.<sup>3</sup> As Winston Churchill was working to form the United Nations after WWII, he famously said, “*Never let a good crisis go to waste*”. In another context, Churchill’s insight on human nature can also be applied to the coming semesters and years as studying abroad rebounds. What new strategies will be developed and maintained? Institutional commitment without fear will be necessary to assure that “studying abroad” will continue to develop as a truly unique and transformational learning experience.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nafsa.org/policy-and-advocacy/policy-resources/independent-research-measuring-impact-study-abroad>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20220107151037200>