

Study Abroad Levels: Toward a Classification of Program Types¹

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Introduction

The time is right for change. International educators and administrators have begun to re-orient their focus from an appraisal of the sheer numbers of students participating in international education to the quality of their experiences abroad. The fact that we in the profession speak more frequently of language acquisition and cross-cultural competence, of outcomes and their assessments, bespeaks a long-needed shift in emphasis.

As we begin to gather assessment data about study abroad outcomes, how can we analyze it intelligently when we have no precise language to differentiate or categorize the types of study abroad experiences associated with that data?² How can we contribute to the clear articulation of educational goals in study abroad, goals that can serve as a counterweight to more and more prevalent “student client” expectations? How—drawing students out of their “comfort zones” instead of creating such zones abroad—can we bring renewed value and prestige to the rewarding difficulty and essential challenge inherent in the process of adaptation to cultural difference?

As the statistics of *Open Doors* each year reveal, overall numbers of U.S. overseas study participants have increased steadily and, at times, impressively during the last two decades. And, with study abroad becoming each year a more attractive “recruiting tool” in the “market” for prospective students, such increases in numbers will likely continue. Unfortunately, the road toward rising student participation is insuffi-

ciently mapped and signposted as it traverses an international education landscape made ever more complex by choices in program focus, destination, duration, participant preparation and ideal outcome. To articulate and refine our understanding of the differences that characterize this terrain, we will need guides of greater precision.

Clearly, it is time to draw distinctions of a qualitative sort—time for international education professionals to consider seriously the elaboration and adoption of one such guide, a hierarchical classification of program types.

Behind the Numbers

As a measure of its success, study abroad today relies upon a clean and simple but clearly limited statistical gauge, that of the raw number or percentage of an institution's students who do some form of their undergraduate academic work abroad. The Web site of a prominent U.S. university chosen at random tells us that last year "some 750 undergraduates—roughly 3 percent of the total—chose to study abroad." Four of the first five sites we quickly surfed in preparing this essay came in with different numbers but the same kind of statistical message, for statistics like this have become a ready measurement—in fact, *the* measurement—of an institution's commitment to overseas study.

Raw participant numbers and simple percentages have unquestionable utility in public relations, trustee meetings, faculty committees and annual reports. Are they not, though, symptomatic of a certain pressure for numbers in an administrative and campus environment newly receptive to things international? In any case, where it exists, such pressure only complements that generated by the profession itself which, in its *Getting on with the Task: A National Mandate for Education Abroad* (Report of the National Task Force on Undergraduate Education Abroad) in 1990, set the utopian goal for 2008 of 20-25 percent participation by all U.S. undergraduates (Hoffa, 376).

It is tempting to see a relationship between a push to produce numbers and the tendency in recent years to favor quickly implemented international study initiatives like educational travel programs or short-term summer sessions. In other words, those programs which, cost-effectively, take the student away from the home campus for as short a time as possible have come to dominate the field, for they can appeal to the widest possible student base by requiring relatively little in the way of prior linguistic and cultural prepa-

ration. Not unsurprisingly, *NAFSA's Guide to Education Abroad for Advisers and Administrators* states that “short-term programs represent the fastest-growing sector” in the field (Szekely, 151). While there is, perhaps, nothing wrong with this development, it does seem inappropriate that such programs be grouped indiscriminately under an umbrella term like “study abroad” with a full spectrum of vastly different overseas-study options, up to and including those based upon widely varied forms of intensive, longer-term cultural, linguistic and professional immersion.

It is undeniable that there are fundamental differences in the academic and cultural experience offered by study abroad programs today. We consider that the creation of a level-based classification system for program types would address this situation honestly and responsibly. Compare, if you will:

- a one-month summer term, requiring little or no host language proficiency, with subject-matter classes in English, collective housing and American roommates; with
- a full-year program for students of advanced linguistic proficiency housed individually in a host family and directly enrolled in local university courses or engaged in a professional internship or service-learning project.

Yet, radically different as they are in terms both of student preparation and commitment and of desired and real outcome, current usage, which relies on raw numbers or percentages, tends more to group these program types than to distinguish between them. As they say in the major leagues, they all look like line drives in the box score.

A level-based classification system clearly distinguishing categories of program design would not be based on judgmentally subjective notions of “quality” but upon comparable objective criteria such as program length, type of student housing, the language in which course work is given, required linguistic competence for admission and other program components. Years ago Lily von Klemperer helped us all to read study abroad literature with greater critical attention.³ Today a classification system arrived at via dialogue and consensus within the profession would, among other things, provide additional, and needed, signposts for prospective participants and their advisers in their vital efforts to define priorities and select programs that are most appropriate to students’ academic, personal and career goals.

Making Distinctions

In making the above point, we naturally distinguish between “culture-based” international education and what could be termed “knowledge-transfer” study abroad. Taking form primarily in such areas as biology field study, scientific exchange and the study of technological applications, knowledge-transfer study targets a form of learning which, while taking place abroad, remains distinct from the interculturalist perspective of culture-based study abroad. Our discussion concerns the latter. Despite slight but consistent growth in the percentage of science majors studying abroad (Szekely, 159), a figure which may indicate an increase in knowledge-transfer overseas study, the experience of the vast majority of sojourners remains primarily language and culture oriented.

While in this vision of study abroad the balance tips decisively toward what has been called “subjective culture” learning—that is, emphasis upon the “assumptions, values and patterns of thinking and behaving . . . learned, shared and maintained by groups of interacting people” (J. & M. Bennett, 154)—this model certainly does not devalue the learning of “objective culture” via the traditional academic course work in history, literature, politics, the arts, etc., that is still at the heart of most overseas learning experiences. The complementary interface of in-class and on-site experience is, on the contrary, vital. Through real-life application, often perceived as more immediate and telling than that of on-campus course work, guided authentic cultural encounters instead tend to confirm the value of objective classroom learning—and vice versa—and all the more so when that learning takes place according to local cultural norms.

We do wish to insist, however, that, with limited exceptions such as certain forms of strictly scientific field work or information exchange, focused and reflective interaction with the host culture is finally what separates study abroad from study at home. And the degree to which program design facilitates such experience is what most distinguishes one study abroad program from another.

Given the range of elements that constitutes any single overseas program, it is nearly as difficult to generalize about program types as it is to generalize about the experiences of their individual participants. Yet we clearly need to do so if we are to guide with vision and purpose the evolution of this field and its burgeoning profusion of program offerings. One way to make

sense of the nearly daily SECUSSA “listserv” new program announcements served up online is our by-now automatic grouping into the various categories commonly in use in the field and brought together in *NAFSA’s Guide to Education Abroad for Advisers and Administrators* (see Soneson *et al*). The categories are familiar: the branch campus or study center, the integrated model, mixed models, independent study, experiential programs. Yet, while clear and helpful as the NAFSA presentation of these categories is, particularly with its measured assessment of the basic program types’ eventual advantages and disadvantages, we would argue for the need to go further and, as a profession, move consensually toward a hierarchical classification.

Educators or Service Providers? Environment or Scenery?

Before elaborating upon further potential advantages of a classification system, as well as certain theoretical and practical obstacles, it seems appropriate to turn to the values upon which such a system must be based if it is to be meaningful. To arrive at useful and viable classification criteria, we must look critically at what study abroad, in general, ought to be trying to do.

Admittedly, the land of values and goals is rocky territory, for it is daunting to generalize about appropriate student outcomes in the highly complex personal and institutional interaction that is study abroad. In one sense, of course, desired and real outcomes are as individual as the students themselves, each with her or his unique life tale, motivation and imagined future. It is not surprising that much research into the subject of student outcomes has a somewhat tentative air or, for that matter, that the word “outcome” itself, clean and technical, effectively has edged aside terms heavier with normative expectation like “values” and “goals.”

A certain old-fashioned generalization of a constructive and rather normative sort remains necessary, however. A level-based classification system for program types begins with the assumption, basic yet vital, that we in this field are educators, not service providers. Our duties should not be seeing to client comfort or customer satisfaction but challenging, stimulating, pushing students to push themselves toward the greatest possible personal growth, both intellectually and emotionally.

In all forms and at all levels of education, of course, gain only comes at the expense of a certain pain; in education abroad, we find this even

more unarguably the case. Sojourners “grow beyond the psychological parameters of the original culture,” Young Kim contends, “in spite of, or rather because of, the adversarial nature of the cross-cultural adaptation process” (Kim, 144). The reflexive response of most of us to any new environment, and particularly to the adversarially unfamiliar foreign environment, is to struggle for control by seeking or reconstructing the familiar. Treating students as paying customers with needs is to deprive them of unfamiliarity and ambiguity, the troubling interaction with which is the heart of the successful sojourn.

Two quick examples: many students begin their experience abroad picked up at the airport after a group flight organized especially for them and, once on the scene, they are provided with the latest technology for electronic-mail communication. In automatically furnishing such “services” and thus responding to what “student clients” seem to want—in this case, reassuring transfer in the company of peers to the study site and easy instant communication with home—it is worthwhile asking if we are not depriving them of what they really need: in the first case, those key initial interactions, unsettling but rich, with their environment; then later, a rare and valuable emotional space with its potential for reflective growth. Here and in similar situations created by countless other defining program-design choices, students who can’t always get what they want just might find they get what they need.

Echoing Darwin, but now in the realm of cross-cultural adaptation, Edward T. Hall argues that, “without environmental change, complex forms of life cannot evolve” (Hall, 16). Environmental change, though, is something entirely different from a change of scenery. *Scenery* provides a backdrop but remains separate from the individual; an *environment* is charged with the dynamics of interaction. Overseas-program design, for students at all levels of prior preparation, should integrate this vital distinction. Sojourners who retain the illusory comfort of their home cultural framework abroad act against a new backdrop which is colorful, interesting, even thrilling. Yet, to the degree that they avoid the stimulating anxiety of direct encounters with the new cultural environment, they evolve slowly, if at all, toward the more complex view of the self and the world that should be the goal of all education and, particularly, education abroad. We are comfortable stating that the presiding goal of study abroad, *la raison d’être*, distinguishing it from study on the home campus,

should be to present participants with a challenge—the emotional and intellectual challenge of direct, authentic cultural encounters and guided reflection upon those encounters.

The Ideal of Cross-cultural Competence

A graduated system of levels, reflecting the degree of cultural immersion aimed at and facilitated by individual program types, would call valuable attention to the fact that certain kinds of programs are, in fundamental ways, further along a scale leading toward an ideal—that of the “cross-cultural competence” of their participants. When one studies a language, the desired goal—linguistic competence—is clear. It provides a context for students’ efforts, allowing them to see the work they provide and the progress they make within a continuum marked by well-defined beginning and ending points, with meaningful gradations *en route* which we freely and comfortably label “elementary,” “intermediate” and “advanced.” When one studies abroad, the desired goal—again, cross-cultural competence—should be made equally clear. As welcome theoretical support, our colleagues in the study of intercultural communication have provided us with a scale charting the stages of individual progress toward cultural adaptation. The well-known “Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity” of Milton Bennett, for example, acknowledges the variety of ways that individuals respond to cultural difference. Charting a journey from denial and defense through minimization, acceptance, adaptation and integration, Bennett’s model reinforces the lesson, at once hard and comforting, that our relations with a new culture are dynamic, evolutionary, “developmental.” At whatever departure point a student begins, the goal of overseas education could be summed up as movement as far as possible forward on this scale.

Components and Compatibility

Study abroad program types can be placed on a scale similar to this model or that offered by language curricula. Whether the metaphor is horizontal (a scale with journey-like steps to an imagined destination) or vertical (stairs to a top floor), the messages are the same, among them, that culture learning is a process; that progress is earned; that, with the invest-

ment of reasonable prior work and preparation, students can begin their sojourns closer to the goals they most define for themselves abroad.

Hoping to stimulate serious consideration of such a classification scale, we feel it appropriate, for discussion's sake, to present a simplified sample working model. We are focusing this discussion on culture-based program types in study destinations requiring foreign language competence. Study abroad in the English-speaking world might require a parallel classification or could be considered on the same scale; for simplicity's sake, while vital, such issues would best be discussed in another forum.

At the heart of the sample system are what we consider to be the seven defining components of overseas programs. Interlocking and interacting in varying and complex ways in the context of countless programs worldwide, these variables constitute an essential starting point for any form of level-based program classification:

1. Length of student sojourn
2. Entry target-language competence
3. Language used in course work
4. Context of academic work
5. Types of student housing
6. Provisions for guided/structured cultural interaction and experiential learning.
7. Guided reflection on cultural experience

In the sample system, instead of broadly trying to include multiple component options at each level, we have let our belief in the inherent compatibility of certain components guide an admittedly prescriptive description of each designated level. Linked, naturally, with considerations of curricular content and quality, these are the elements study abroad advisors take into consideration on a daily basis in helping their students find appropriate program matches. While in no two programs do these variables interact in exactly the same fashion, they do tend to combine in certain usefully recognizable patterns. The key organizing factor within our sample classification system is the compatibility of program components, which we define as the degree to which these variables work together to favor thoughtful interaction with the host culture appropriate to the participant's goals and prior preparation.

Take housing options, for example. When planning a new program, administrators weigh the pros and cons of housing students abroad in

shared apartments, dormitories or host families. Often financial considerations or program logistics guide the choice. It is essential to take into consideration participants' language level as well as their commitment to mastering the skills of intercultural communication. A student possessing an elementary or low-intermediate entry level in the host language, for example, can manage a very successful host-family visit of a weekend to about three weeks. Everyone is on best behavior because the stay is short, and cultural *faux pas* or misunderstandings are overlooked or forgiven for the same reason. Feelings often remain intensely positive, and life-long contacts may be established in this short but emotionally rewarding time.

Place the same student in a semester-long home stay, though, and chances are great that after the initial euphoria the student will drift away from the family with whom she cannot communicate and seek comfort with her American friends from the program, even refusing invitations to extended family gatherings in exchange for "safe time" with other program participants. Not only is the rich resource of a host-family contact wasted on an ill-prepared student, but the mismatch can lead to such perversions as the student insisting that the family speak English because, after all, "I pay to stay here and deserve to be understood." James Citron's 1996 NAFSA Conference paper studying third-culture formation abroad memorably takes us into such real-life situations.⁴ As in the coordination of all program components, matching the challenge of the housing option to student linguistic and intercultural fluency helps maximize the use of study abroad resources to better assure a rewarding outcome for all concerned.

The Levels

It is clear that no classification system could take into account the unlimited variety of combinations, even among the seven program components specified, which exists in study abroad programs today. Each of the five levels of classification that we offer for consideration, as fully described in Figure 1, constitutes a blend of program components appropriate to students with roughly similar motivations and prior preparation. Necessarily schematic, this quick sketch is intended to illustrate the kinds of distinctions necessary if such a classification system is to have meaning. The classifications we propose are:

- Level One: Study Tour
- Level Two: Short-Term Study
- Level Three: Cross-Cultural Contact Program
- Level Four: Cross-Cultural Encounter Program
- Level Five: Cross-Cultural Immersion Program

In this conception, the Study Tour would include field trips and other such site visits of limited duration for which the language is English and housing is collective. Cultural encounters leading to adaptation are not a goal of this kind of study experience. A classic example would be the art-history tour, with group hotel accommodations, morning lectures, museum visits, guided walks and excursions. Here traditional course work can take on a vivid reality and focus; for many students, such tours constitute a first inter-

Figure 1.

<i>Program Components</i>	<i>Level One: Study Tour</i>	<i>Level Two: Short-Term Study</i>
<i>Duration</i>	Several days to a few weeks	3 to 8 weeks, summer programs
<i>Entry target-language competence</i>	Elementary to intermediate	Elementary to intermediate
<i>Language used in course work</i>	English	English and target-language
<i>Academic work context</i>	Home institution faculty	In-house or institute for foreign students
<i>Housing</i>	Collective	Collective and/or home stay
<i>Provisions for cultural interaction, experiential learning</i>	None	None
<i>Guided reflection on cultural experience</i>	None	Orientation program

national exposure or, for those previously traveled, an experience of greater intellectual and aesthetic density than that offered by simple tourism.

Short-Term Study includes on-site summer and other short-term programs offering elementary and intermediate target-language instruction and “subject-matter” course work in English. In such programs, academic work is organized for the student group or, perhaps, with other foreign students; often collective, housing may include a home stay visit. An orientation program handles logistical considerations and provides cultural do’s and don’ts, but organized and directed forms of cultural interaction or experiential learning are not possible due to duration and language constraints. The typical four- to six-week summer course allows students a first exposure to language and civilization in its cultural setting while, in theo-

Study Abroad Levels

<i>Level Three:</i> Cross-Cultural Contact Program	<i>Level Four:</i> Cross-Cultural Encounter Program	<i>Level Five:</i> Cross-Cultural Immersion Program
Semester	Semester to academic year	Semester to academic year
Elementary to intermediate	Pre-advanced to advanced	Advanced
English and target-language	Predominantly target-language	Target-language in all curricular and extracurricular activities
Student group or with other international students	In house student group	Local norms, partial or complete direct enrollment
Collective, home stay visit, home stay rental	Home stay rental or integration home stay	Individual integration home stay
None or limited	Optional participation in occasional integration activities	Required regular participation in cultural integration program, extensive direct cultural contact via service learning, work internship
Orientation program	Orientation program, initial and ongoing	Orientation program, mentoring, on-going orientation or course in cross-cultural perspectives, reflective writing and research

ry, acting as a possible springboard for longer and more in-depth overseas experience. Short-term language study of advanced level, much less frequent, might constitute a subgroup or serve as a bridge to subsequent levels in which the increased tie investment favors more in-depth goals.

The next level, the Cross-Cultural Contact Program, differs from the previous level primarily by its duration. Course work, organized on-site for the student group or in coordination with other foreign students, typically would mix classes in English with those in intermediate target-language instruction. For students wishing host-family contact without the possibility or commitment of full integration, the short home stay visit or longer home stay rental is possible. Level-three students can benefit from more elaborate cultural orientation and even simpler forms of structured cultural contact. While many participants are guided primarily by their own cultural norms and draw their most positive memories from student group contact, certain sojourners move toward meaningful, memorable exchanges with host nationals during their semester abroad. Self-aware, the latter are often those who, at semester's end, recognize their progress with that line familiar to overseas-program directors: "If only I could start my experience now"

Cross-Cultural Encounter Programs distinguish themselves by their requirements of pre-advanced to advanced entry-level host language competence, severely reduced reliance on English language course work, and home stay rental housing for a period of a semester or academic year. Students normally would take their class work in a "island" student-group context or among other foreign students, with the level of immersion limited by frequent reliance on English among members of the student group. While most participants in such programs adopt behavior that Citron identifies as "third cultural" (Citron, 16 ff.)—that is, in its norms neither strictly American nor strictly faithful to the host culture—they often make significant progress in the recognition of and adaptation to local cultural rhythms.

Level five, or Cross-Cultural Immersion Program, participants do course work uniquely in the host language, organized in partial or complete direct local enrollment, with the target language replacing English in all circumstances, curricular and extracurricular. Students choosing not to do traditional academic work but integrated directly in the host culture through service learning, independent projects or professional internships

would fall naturally into this category. Participants in level-five programs are housed directly in the community, usually through an individual integration home stay, which calls upon students with the appropriate linguistic and cultural skills to function as active members of the host family. Additional elements distinguishing this level would be its duration, at least a semester and ideally an academic year, and provisions for on-going, on-site mentoring by a qualified professional. The mentor or cross-cultural facilitator accompanies the adaptation process with concrete orientation information and guides reflection upon the students' direct cultural encounters by helping to analyse the cross-cultural dynamic they reveal.

Accountability

Before moving to the numerous benefits inherent in a classification system, it is appropriate to anticipate certain practical issues. Chief among these would be the obvious difficulty of formally coming to agreement upon the criteria essential to hierarchical organization. Each year our profession generates a wider range of program options. While agreeing on level criteria would be hard enough if study abroad were limited to traditional program forms in the familiar Western European context, one thinks of the exciting work being done to create study opportunities in the developing world, as well as the stimulating contribution of new experience and service learning, nontraditional and hybrid program choices. The task would be difficult, but we are confident that the members of our profession—analyzing the role and contribution of different program types, not neutrally as separate phenomena, but within the context of a full range of available choices—could come to agreement upon a system capable of providing meaningful distinctions while remaining flexible to the needs of an ever-changing field.

Assuming that this is the case, that the criteria corresponding to the various classification levels have been chosen and announced, we are faced with the question of accountability, *vis à vis* a program's "rating" or placement by level within this system. It is important to insist that we are not calling for some kind of accreditation system or outside agency certification, rating individual programs and providing a numbered seal of approval. Instead, we imagine a consensually agreed-upon classification system that is fundamentally self-regulating, to which members of the

profession adhere freely and honestly.

An example is necessary. After study of the announced criteria distinguishing program types from each other and a period of self-evaluation, the administration of a study center or university-organized program might identify itself as providing, say, a level-three Cross-Cultural Contact Program study experience for its participants. This level would be clearly announced in program materials or publicity, along with the specification of corresponding components. The program would be expected to justify the claims it makes and to change its rating according to eventual program enhancements. We can imagine, for example, the fulfilling moment when, across the Internet and in published program materials, a university announces that it is now committed to offering a Cross-Cultural Encounter Program experience rated “four” on the scale.

Our fictional institution might even wish to publicize the fact that it offers both a level-three and level-four study experience, for it seems clear that some programs will be capable of facilitating study at two different, parallel levels. The clear exception to this principle would be the level-five Cross-Cultural Immersion Program which, because of its cultural demands within a unique host-language environment, would require an across-the-board commitment from the entire on-site group. At other levels, according to different linguistic entry points, differing lengths of individual sojourn, and varied housing, academic and other options, individual students within the same program could have experiences rated at differing levels. In all cases, the level of the overseas-study experience should be recognized formally on an individual basis in a final transcript or other documentation.

Advantages of a Study Abroad Classification System

Clarifying Choices

Acceptance by the profession of a typology clearly distinguishing and ranking program designs would offer numerous advantages to overseas-study participants and their parents, to the professionals who facilitate their experiences and, in the long run, perhaps to the students' home institutions. Consider how a clear hierarchical listing, contextualizing

program types within a meaningful continuum, would help in advising sophomores as they consider program options. In one sense such categorizing would focus the individual student's attention upon a reduced palette of reasonable and realistic options, thus helping to refine individual priorities, making it easier to select programs most appropriate to the student's academic and personal goals.

Yet more important is the way a rating scale, by contextualizing the individual offering under consideration, would work to widen the scope of the student's ability to discern the true nature of the program he or she is considering. We want our students to know what they want from their experience abroad; for this they must understand the many things study abroad can be. Seeing a program option within a range differentiating progressive levels of commitment to cultural interaction highlights to students the lesson that all cultural learning, and theirs in particular, is developmental. Thus informed, they will be more aware and more thoughtfully engaged in the process of their overseas-program choices.

This contextualization of individual programs would make concrete to students considering study abroad where they are in their preparation for the process of culture learning and where, perhaps, with an additional investment of course work and other preparation, they might hope to progress quickly. One student will find the type-two Short-Term program, for which he currently is prepared, appropriate to the kind of experience abroad he desires. Importantly, made at least implicitly aware of other options by the mere fact of the rating system, he may make his choice with a greater degree of awareness and consciousness. Considering the level-two program for which she is linguistically prepared, another prospective student may choose instead to wait, take two more language courses, then search for an appropriate level-four Cross-Cultural Encounter Program option. If study abroad program levels only serve to heighten the attention of prospective students to their program choices and the nature of the experiences to come, they would more than justify their existence.

Acknowledging Achievement

The typology under discussion could play an equally important role upon the return of students from their international experiences. If our institutions are serious about reinforcing the international dimension of

the experiences they offer, one would hope that they are open to implementing a system that would clearly acknowledge the kind of overseas-study experiences their students have had and reward those achievements. Today, the lack of such acknowledgment constitutes an unfortunate academic injustice. The intellectual and emotional challenges of program types vary widely. But who can tell that today, as study abroad grades rarely are reproduced on home-university transcripts but anonymously disappear as bulk credit. This should stop, especially since many students consider their time abroad to be the most significant, worthwhile and memorable educational experiences of their college careers. To do justice, such work should be highlighted as dramatically as possible on the student's academic record, but the rigorously evaluative nature of the transcript demands that this be done in a manner calibrated to reflect honestly the nature of the experience. An objective rating system of program types could play a role here, just as it could bring more meaning to the résumés of study abroad alumni.

Quality: Getting the Word Out

As an objective reflection of certain essential program differences, a rating system could bring focus and direction to the publicizing of study abroad opportunities on campus and off, for foreign study is likely to play a growing role in the recruitment of quality students. The developmental, progressive nature of this scale is pedagogically useful. Its schematic form displays for incoming freshmen, and prospective overseas participants and their parents, the full range of options an institution might offer and how one type of program option compares to others. Further, the schematic form illustrates which program is most compatible with the student's personal, educational and career goals. Usually the source of a student's financing abroad, parents—readers of *Consumer Reports* all—should welcome an additional source of information in the choice of their children's summer, semester or year abroad.

While we resist viewing education as another consumer product, it has long struck us as odd that so many parents are willing to finance study experiences overseas that, in terms of what we identify as the goals of study abroad, offer very little in the way of "value." Yet the widespread image of study abroad as dressed-up vacation time will persist as long as we allow it to. One way to battle this image—these days often amplified

to attract student/clients—is to re-educate students and their parents regarding the nobler ends and means of study abroad. Presenting the full range of program types, rated objectively according to their capacity for the facilitation of authentic, reflective cultural experience, is a first step. Another audience for such a lesson is, of course, skeptical faculty and administrators. You will recognize them as those individuals prone to gibe you playfully about your “vacation” after an exhausting two-week “if it’s 2:30 Tuesday, this must be Zimbabwe” tour of program sites. Despite the mission statements, within the academy the incomprehension of the role and importance of international education often equals that in the larger community.

Coherence and Institutional Commitment

It is at the level of the institution itself that the scale we propose might have its most lasting effect. Allow us, if you will, to imagine a day in which the thousands of program offerings worldwide fall with relative precision into a small number of supple yet meaningfully coherent categories, ranked according to the extent of culture learning to which they are committed. With this classification in place, the sample figure of undergraduates per year studying abroad, or percent of a university’s total, comes to seem but the crude gauge it is. A far more accurate reflection of the institution’s commitment to international education would be figures drawn from the scale here proposed.

For argument’s sake, let’s say that the numbers break down this way, with 80 percent of participants placed in level-one or -two Study-Tour and Short-Term programs, and only 5 percent of students abroad at the fifth, or most challenging, Cross-Cultural Immersion Program level. Faced with revealing data of this sort, an institution would be required to examine its commitment to international education. Previously disguised in raw numbers and percentages, does the more subtle measure inherent in these figures, now publicly visible, accurately reflect what this college or university wishes to do abroad? Perhaps the answer is yes. If it is not, and the decision is made, say, to encourage and prepare students more actively for participation in the higher level overseas-program types, such a decision could have repercussions throughout the institution. One thinks of changes in administrative and curricular policies up to and including

reinforcing campus-wide foreign language pre-requisites, changing major requirements and actively encouraging forms of overseas study for certain majors. A rating system could be a force for significant positive change simply through its presentation of a nuanced picture of real institutional commitment to international education.

Conclusion: Upward Pressure

Our conclusion begins with a parable drawn from real life. In the early 1990s the French began to complain that the famous national emblem, the *baguette*, was losing its character as more and more bread sold in corner bakeries was, in fact, being produced industrially. The government's response was visionary. After a moment of reflection and a nationwide campaign that had the population comparing bread samples in the street, the French parliament passed a law that required the various kinds of *baguettes* be labeled qualitatively. In other words, it was first acknowledged that all bread was not the same. Factory-produced and shipped *baguettes* were, for example, clearly distinguished from the *baguette artisanale*, which is kneaded, raised and freshly baked on-premises in France's famous *boulangeries*. The result has been wonderful; in fact, the French *baguette* has never been so good. For, finally, who wants to buy—thus who wants to make?—cardboard-like industrial bread when, thanks to appropriate qualitative labels, it is so easy to identify the real thing? Though study abroad is not bread, at their best both are sources of pride, eminently memorable, emotionally gratifying.

We favor the creation and application of a classification system of program types for the subtle but certain upward pressure it would place on individuals and institutions in the field of study abroad. We would be far from alone in our happiness if a rating of program types gave prospective sojourners clearer, more honest ideas of what was in store for them; if the distinctions of classification encouraged students to re-think their upcoming experience and better prepare; if former participants in lower-ranked programs really did come back for second experiences of greater intensity and depth; if universities re-thought language and other institutional policies and brought muscle to their study abroad efforts not just in the area of numbers but in that of quality, as defined by the degree of cultural challenge their students are encouraged, and sufficiently prepared, to accept.

The precise system proposed is not, finally, the point of this essay. The real point is finding ways, together as a profession, to encourage students in this most global of fields to adopt a global, encompassing vision of what study abroad is, to show them honestly how all the pieces fit together, to indicate where, given dedication and commitment, their cultural exploration can lead. Better—and more honestly—informed, they will make better choices. If the system we propose offers a more integrated understanding of what study abroad is and can be, it will push certain students toward preparing for and accepting greater cultural challenges in the programs they choose. Study abroad is not about providing immediate comfort and services to clients, safe and familiar cultural bubbles, moving bodies around geographically, simple changes of scenery. It's about recognizing the challenge that true involvement in an unfamiliar world represents, and choosing the hard, progressive road to understanding what Hall calls the “inherent logic” of a foreign culture (Hall, 4). Recognizing this logic as it unfolds is the heart of cross-cultural understanding and respect.

Through the interaction of its varied components, study abroad helps students recognize and respect cultural difference and develop skills and a willingness to adapt to that difference. A serious commitment to this task is a necessary foundation for a profession that must deal with current and future pressures—for numbers, for percentages, for increased “client” services—while never losing sight of its educational purpose. Arguably, study abroad is the field of higher education most turned to the future even as the values it engenders—sophisticated discernment, the tolerant and open spirit, a civil adaptability—are those of liberal education at its most traditional. While helping its participants meet the abundant challenges of the future, a level-based classification system would provide a new, clarifying focus for international education and, in so doing, highlight its most noble goals

Notes

¹An earlier version of this essay was presented during the 1999 NAFSA Conference in Denver, Colorado.

²That, now, attention is given to this question is evidenced by the Forum on Education Abroad's outcomes research committee, future special issue of *Frontiers* (volume X, 2004), and a new SECUSSA research committee.

³See: NAFSA Guide, Lily Van Klemperer Award

⁴James Citron “Short-Term Study Abroad: Integration, Third Culture Formation, and Re-entry.” NAFSA Conference Paper, Phoenix, June 1996, unpublished.

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