



The long-term impact of a sustainability-focused short-term study abroad program

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According to Open Doors (2015), 304,467 U.S. students studied abroad for academic credit in 2013/14 which showed an increase of 5% over the previous year and 62% of the study abroad experiences were considered short term (eight weeks or less). The increase in globalization at the end of the twentieth century encouraged more students to study abroad, however not all of them were able to dedicate a full semester to the experience. Paige and Fry (et al., 2009) concluded that there was no significant difference in global engagement between students who had participated in either longer or shorter experiences. They also stated that a good short term study abroad program is strongly connected to coursework and a part of a larger learning experience.

In March 2015, four universities, each located in a different country, bonded together to create a project that would educate their respective students about sustainability in the fashion industry on a global scale. A short term study abroad experience was developed - each university had one faculty and one student representative who traveled to each other's locations within an 18 day time period. At each location, visits were arranged to take the team to retail stores which embrace sustainable practices, resale shops, small manufacturers, textile sorting facilities as well as museums, cultural places and local restaurants. Open forums, a symposium and question/answer sessions were held at each institution.

The students were required to ask pertinent questions during the visits and summarize each day's learning in a blog which could be viewed by students and faculty at the home institutions. These blogs formed a major part of the experience as the students would spend each day reflecting on their learning and understanding of the difficulties and possibilities regarding sustainable practices. This site became an active archive not only of the experience but also of the information and sustainable activities sponsored. Throughout the trip, meetings were held as a group to discuss new knowledge, compare retail shops and manufacturing in the different countries and ideate on how changes might be made in the future.

According to Boyd and Fales (1983), reflective learning is "the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in a changed conceptual perspective" (p. 100). At the end of the 18 day trip, students went home and were given three weeks to reflect on their experience. At that time, students showed an increased awareness and understanding of the global scope of the issues of sustainability in the fashion industry and indicated that they wanted to carry this knowledge into their lives and workplace in the future.

To determine the long term effect of the study abroad experience, questions were emailed to students one year after the program and they were asked to reflect once again on the

experience. The aim was to gauge how the students now perceive the effects of this experience on their subsequent academic or career choices, and their knowledge and dedication to the topic of sustainability. Responses showed that the benefits of this short term program helped develop students to the point where they are re-evaluating their own behaviors and orientating them toward all the little changes in lifestyle that can really alter the impact on the environment. They also identified that the experience has given them a more positive outlook on the fashion industry as a whole and it still informs their view on how they want to live their lives.

...the most important thing I took from this experience was the realization that, despite the dire situation currently facing the fashion industry...in terms of overconsumption of resources and unsustainable practice, there are a rising number of people who are actually successfully making meaningful changes, and that awareness and support of changes in this domain is growing – all of which gives me more hope for a better future.
– AUS student

... this trip changed my life. This trip has also changed the way I think about the fashion industry; it has really made me feel alive at times when I research or discuss sustainable topics related to the fashion industry. I am really excited to go out and start a career focused on fashion and sustainability. – US student

...this project has made me acutely aware of the extent of the issues and the importance of engaging in discussion about what can be done; to be a part of developing solutions to problems is much more important than profiteering from fantasy that drives consumer tastes. I have noticed a change in mind-set within myself since returning...As a result...I have gained...life changing knowledge regarding the importance of sustainability that...I will be able to use to inform any future job search and occupation. – UK student

The project's initial mission included encouraging students to become active in working towards a sustainable future, to better understand the scope and scale of the problems the apparel industry faces in creating a sustainable future and to gain a global perspective on sustainable innovations. The responses from the students show that the long term impact of this global project was successful in these areas. Future short term study abroad experiences are currently under discussion.

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