

# The Decision to Study Abroad:

A Case Study on the Individual Rationales  
of US Liberal Arts Students in Japan

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## Abstract

In the US, a wide range of stakeholders, including the federal government, non-governmental agencies, and higher education institutions, realize the importance of equipping students with international and intercultural competencies. Study abroad, a form of internationalization of higher education, is widely viewed as a method to achieve these goals. Compared to other institutional types in the US, many liberal arts colleges have a high study abroad participation rate. Liberal arts colleges provide a unique context to explore study abroad due to their focus on undergraduate education and the importance placed upon study abroad as one of the main centerpieces of internationalization efforts. With the growing focus on increasing study abroad participation rates, this exploratory case study examines the rationales of liberal arts college students from the US who studied abroad in Japan for one year. Empirical data from qualitative in-depth interviews identified the following emergent themes in the individual decision-making process: home institution, family, ethnic heritage, future ambitions, host institution, and liberal arts education.

## Introduction

When we explore the internationalization of higher education, it is important to understand the context and environmental factors (Innis & Hellsten, 2004). Globalization has changed the landscape of the world. Internationalization is not only influenced by globalization but also a vital actor in globalization. Internationalization's two pillars, "at-home" and "abroad", allow nations, sectors, and institutions to integrate international, intercultural, and global dimensions into higher education (Knight, 2008). As we move forward in the 21st century, our world is not focused exclusively on economic competitiveness. There is also an emphasis on cooperation for economic, security, and global issues. The potential personal outcomes of study abroad place it as a pivotal strategy for nations to develop individuals equipped with intercultural skills and international mindsets to achieve transnational cooperation. Despite this emphasis on the importance placed upon study abroad to meet the needs of our ever globalizing and intertwined world, individual rationales for student mobility remain an under researched area (Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008; Nyaupane, Paris, & Teye, 2010).

Within this context, this exploratory case study on a select study abroad program in Japan aims to understand the rationales and expected outcomes that influenced US liberal arts college students in their decision to study abroad in Japan for one year. Qualitative in-depth interviews with a semi-structured, open-ended approach were conducted with 10 respondents. The empirical evidence provides insights into the decision-making process and identified the following emergent themes: home institution, family, ethnic heritage, future ambitions, host institution, and liberal arts education.

## **Literature Review**

### **Internationalization of Higher Education and Study Abroad in the United States**

Since the 19th century, internationalization of higher education and student mobility has been an important element of US higher education (Altbach, 2005; De Wit & Rumbley, 2008). A wide range of stakeholders across sectors, including policy makers, researchers, and practitioners, have urged US higher education to recognize its vital role of providing more US students with international experiences and skills (Norris & Gillespie, 2009). According to Knight, “internationalization at the national/sector/institutional levels is the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education at the institutional and national levels” (2004, p. 21). The decentralized, mainly bottom-top process of internationalization in the US focuses on study abroad as a means of internationalization. Study abroad is widely recognized as a means to meet the challenges of the 21st century by cultivating intercultural competencies and international understanding (Altbach & Teichler, 2001; Daly & Barker, 2005; Kean & Hamilton, 2008). This is supported by the most commonly cited benefits of study abroad: broadened perspective and knowledge, foreign language skills, intercultural competencies, interpersonal skills, and ability to engage with diverse cultural situations in daily life and work (e.g., Akande & Slawson, 2000; Alfred & Byram, 2002; Chao, 2000; Dolby, 2004)

If the core function of the institution differs, then the rationales for internationalization and promotion of student mobility may also deviate (Knight, 2008). Liberal arts colleges present a unique context to explore internationalization and student mobility given their characteristics of having a small student population, emphasizing teaching and faculty contact, student-centered small class sizes, broad curriculum, and an institutional focus on the delivery of high quality undergraduate education. In two previous studies (Hayward & Siaya, 2003; Green & Siaya, 2005), the advantages and disadvantages for liberal arts colleges in internationalization are examined. The advantages noted are the close faculty contact, smaller campus and classrooms, and activeness in the recruitment, financial support and general support of international students. Furthermore, there is often an international dimension in the curriculum

with international oriented courses and foreign language requirements. However, the small nature of liberal arts colleges also present challenges to internationalization as well. The disadvantages include less human resources and administrative structures to monitor and implement internationalization and insufficient articulated commitment to internationalization.

### **Individual Rationales for Study Abroad**

Study abroad programs stem from the early post-WWI period to provide students the opportunity of a junior year abroad. The original purpose of the junior year abroad was for students to spend one academic year immersed in another country to develop the following areas: “curricular (to develop foreign language skills); cross-cultural (to learn about other cultures as a means of preventing future wars); and developmental” (Twombly, Salisbury, Tumanut, and Klute, 2012, p. 15). Several rationales identified by Nyaupane et al. (2010) include promoting world-windedness and international understanding, educational goals of foreign language proficiency, increasing competitiveness and career opportunities, and exploring classes and subject areas not available at home institutions. Other rationales include understanding more about the host country, viewing home country from a comparative perspective, cultural enrichment, cultural skills, personal development, and desire to travel (Teichler & Steube, 1991).

Today, many higher education institutions have hopes to increase study abroad participation rates. Furthermore, study abroad is now being incorporated into the academic curriculum more so than before (Fry, Paige, Jon, Dillow, & Nam, 2009). Despite this growing emphasis of increasing study abroad participation rates to cultivate intercultural competencies and foster internationally-minded individuals, Nyaupane et al. (2010) state that the literature examining the motivations of study abroad participants is remains limited. At the core of student mobility and the decision-making process that leads to studying abroad is the individual. Therefore, the rationales that facilitate student mobility on the individual level are important to recognize. In addition, Llewellyn-Smith and McCabe (2008) highlight the importance of understanding individual rationales because the global education marketplace is becoming increasingly competitive with more students crossing borders and more study abroad options.

### **The Context of Japan for US Study Abroad Students**

The US and Japan have a long history of mutual academic exchange. Historically, Japan is the top non-traditional destination for US study abroad students since the 1950s until it was surpassed by China at the turn of the 21st century (Institute of International Education 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015). In addition, the US is the one country from outside of Asia in the top sending countries to Japan (JASSO 2015).

Despite the prominence of China as a host destination and emerging popularity of South Korea, the number of US study abroad students choosing Japan as their host country continues to increase at the same overall increase rate.

In the last three decades, Japan has implemented different plans to in efforts to internationalization its higher education system and attract international students. The education reforms in the 1980s aimed to continue social and economic prosperity and further development as a leader of the world (Yonezawa, 2003b). During this time, the “100,000 by 2000” plan aimed to increase the number of international students studying in Japan to 100,000 by the 21st century. This plan was achieved in 2003. In 2001, the “21st Center of Excellence Plan” was established to foster world-class research universities (Yonezawa, 2003a). In 2008, the “300,000 by 2020” plan was initiated with a mission to create “A Japan That is Open to the World” as part of the country’s global strategy and boost number of international students to 300,000 and supports Japan’s international human resource pool while also building human networks between Japan and other countries and enhancing mutual understanding (MEXT, 2009). In 2009, the “Global 30 Project” selected 13 universities implement major university level internationalization strategies during the first five-year cycle (Kato, 2010; MEXT, 2011). In Japan’s internationalization efforts, there is an evident focus on the recruitment of international students from all regions of the world in the strategies.

## **Methodology**

This exploratory case study employed qualitative in-depth interviews in order understand the rationales and expected outcomes that influenced American liberal arts college students in their decision to study abroad in Japan. Semi-structured, open-ended questions were utilized to collect data in the study abroad decision making process with the primary goal of identify the main motivating factors that influences students to choose their host country and study abroad program. Each interview was digitally recorded for accuracy and lasted approximately 90 minutes.

Convenience sampling was used by the researcher on a select study abroad program. An email eliciting volunteers for the research was sent to 28 students from U.S. liberal arts colleges of whom just arrived in Japan to start their study abroad. Out of the 28 students, a total of 10 interviews were conducted in the fall of 2010. At the time of the study, the respondents had spent two weeks in Japan. All the respondents were participants on the same study abroad program and planned duration at their host institution was one year. Participants of this research study included 7 females and 3 males. 3 of the respondents’ majors were Japanese studies, 2 were East Asian Studies, and 1 was Asian Studies, Additionally, there were majors of Cultural Anthropology, Art, and History. Due to the exploratory design of this study, this study does not represent the average study abroad participant. The study aims to shed light unto one

particular subset of study abroad participants: students of liberal arts colleges.

The collected data were transcribed verbatim and first coded using open coding to identify emergent themes. The next step in the coding process categorized the codes by grouping them around phenomena discovered in the data. The interview data was organized into different themes and issues to further conceptualize the emergent themes by coding until theoretical saturation was reached. Quotations were then selected from the interviews that illuminated the themes and issues.

## **Data Analysis and Findings**

The data analysis found the following emergent themes in relation to the students' study abroad decision: home institution, family, ethnic heritage, future ambitions, host institution, and liberal arts education. Although the themes are listed separately, it must be noted that the themes interact with each other throughout the decision-making process.

### **Decision to Study Abroad**

There are two time frames when respondents decided to study abroad: before entering college and after entering college. "Since high school I wanted to study abroad somewhere. So, going into college I knew it was something that I was going to do" (R1). For respondents who identified that they wanted to study abroad before they entered college, they "often met ... exchange students in high school ... always thought that sounded awesome" (R3). The major motivations for study abroad for these respondents included meeting exchange students in high school, having family members who participated in international activities, and language classes taken during their secondary education.

The ability to study abroad was a major factor in their decision-making process of selecting their home institution: "study abroad was definitely on my list of things my college had to have" (R3). For some respondents, they decided to study abroad after entering college when they "found out about the different programs that were offered" (R5). They found information about the available study abroad programs through language classes, study abroad fairs, and faculty.

### **Home Institution**

A significant influence for all of the respondents was their home institution. Their home institutions encouraged the students to study abroad. R6 tells of an environment that encourages and cultivates study abroad that all the respondents experienced in their home institutions. She felt that through hearing about other students' study abroad experiences her "spark was ignited and with every story [her] flame would grow bigger and bigger." This reflects the fact that liberal arts colleges have a

high study abroad participation rates (Green & Siaya, 2005). The characteristics of liberal arts colleges also contribute to students feeling that “junior year is just the year when everyone goes off and does something (abroad)” (R3). Given that liberal arts colleges have small enrollments, small class-sizes, and are residential, there are more opportunities for students to interact with each other and rely their experiences with study abroad compared to other institutional types with a large student population, larger classes, and many students who do not live on campus that can result in less opportunities to share study abroad experiences.

The home institution also aided and facilitated in the process of finding information, preparations, and application for study abroad. Many respondents shared that they attended study abroad fairs and study abroad program representatives visiting language classes. “I didn’t feel like I was doing it by myself or anything. They will work for you to see the best way to go about doing it and helping with classes to make sure they transfers okay, like classes and stuff like that” (R2). The dissemination of study abroad opportunities along with the administrative support, as described by R2, provides an environment conducive to the promotion of study abroad participation.

### **Family**

Familial influence was a major part of the decision to study abroad for many of the respondents. For some respondents, they had previous experience of travelling abroad, siblings who had study abroad experiences, or family members who worked abroad. The respondents also identified their parents as being supportive in their decision to study abroad. However, for one respondent, there was a barrier in the beginning. “They don’t understand why I want to study abroad most of the time, but they are like, ‘if that is what you want to do and that’s your dream, I know that you’ll be happy about it” (R5). According to R5, the family eventually acquiesced and supported the decision to study abroad to cultivate global leadership needed in her future career.

### **Ethnic Heritage**

Of the ten respondents, three identified with having familial ties with the host country. For these respondents, coming to the host country was “coming back to (my) roots. While I am here, hopefully I can check out some relatives that still live here that I’ve never met before. So, I think it is more of that kind of thing, my own person road as well to come here” (R2). For R1, “as I was taking these classes (my mother’s native language) I got more interested in my mother’s culture. So, I started thinking that I wanted to go to Japan. Especially, my family here (in Japan) is trying to talk to me, and it would be really interested if we could become closer.” By studying abroad in the host country, the three respondents felt they could become closer to their ethnic heritage and reconnect with their family on a deeper level.

## Future Ambitions

All of the respondents indicated studying abroad would affect their future and “always knew studying abroad would change” them (R8). For some, they could “see how the feeling is here (in the host country) and if (they) like it. Just get an idea and test the grounds” (R2) by studying abroad in the host country. Some respondents felt like R4: “I didn’t really know what I want to do in the future, so partly coming here I partly hoped that I might stumble on something that I might think I want to do.”. R5 echoes the view of study abroad as an igniter of interest in a career path as she thought “I would probably found out during my time studying abroad because something would probably spark my interest somewhere.” For respondents who were not sure of their career plans, they “were hoping that by the end of the year I would have an idea of the kind of career I would want to go into” (R8).

In addition to finding guidance for their career path, respondents felt that they would gain intercultural competence that would better equip them to enter the workforce upon graduation. Below, not only does R3 recognize the skills studying abroad will give her, but she also refers to the competitive edge she thinks she will have compared to those who never studied abroad when she enters the workforce.

R3: I think a lot of companies, especially the ones I am interested in the future, really wants someone who is well rounded as supposed to someone who just studied. Someone who can talk to people with open doors, someone who has been through challenging types of experiences that aren’t the run of the mill. (People like that) has more of a shot in whatever kind of things they want to do in the future. Yeah, definitely I thought study abroad would help.

The reputation of the host institution was an important factor when deciding on the study abroad program and their future ambitions. R7 states the name value of the host institution is important for him. The host institution has a high brand value compared to his home institution. This is echoed by many respondents who also share that the name value of the institution could be important when applying for jobs relating to Japan and Asia. R1 also notes the importance of the host institution’s name value and connections made for the future: “people who go to this host institution sometimes they a. learn more and b. in the future, they have better connections partly because of the name and prestige of the host institution ... in Tokyo, you can make a lot of connections.”

Several of the respondents also identified their undergraduate study abroad experience as a stepping stone for future studies at the graduate level. “After school, I am thinking of applying for research grants to do some of my studies in Japan. I am also planning to go to graduate school, possibly within Japan or the East Coast” (R1).

## **Host Institution**

The theme of courses at the host institution was prevalent in the interviews. The host offers academic courses in English. The respondents were looking forward to taking “a lot of classes that weren’t available at my college” (R5) and “getting a different perspective of how professors teach, which is interesting. I like having a lot of different experiences” (R4). Overall, the respondents were “excited about learning” at the host institution (R6).

However, many respondents voiced concerns about the courses at the host institution. Many of the respondents talked with past participants of the study abroad program. R6 recounts her talk with “students who had gone in the past, they had said that the courses are not as difficult in colleges in Japan compared to at my college ... They said that the classes are helpful. But, you honestly learn a lot outside of the classroom too. So, I wasn’t really worried about the level or the difficulty.” R6 is lead to believe classes at the host institution would not be comparable to her home college. She then recognizes the importance of experiencing daily life in the host country to gain a deeper understand of the culture. As R2 states, “just living in the society, you can get more information I think. By just observing, I can see the roles. I think it all can help me.”

Other concerns respondents had pertaining to the academic experience at their host institution included: “going from such a small school to such a big school, it is much more impersonal” (R4). R4 continues to discuss the differences of her home institution and host institution in regards to the style of the class. Because her host institution, like most liberal arts college, has small, discussion style classes, she was concerned about “having the opportunity to hear different people’s points of views and not just the professors’ because the professors know a lot but they are not infallible.” R4 divulges that she was “not ... necessary worried if I would do well academically, but more just that it would be a big change ... a lot of classes (at the host institution) are graded on a midterm and a final test. At my home college, there are not a lot of midterms and finals. The grading is more spread out over the semester.” The style of courses offered at the respondents’ home institution and host institution differed. Although the respondents were anxious about how they would fare in larger, lecture-based classes, they were also eager to experience and embrace the courses at the host institution to gain new perspectives from faculty members not only from Japan but around the world in a truly international classroom.

## **Study abroad in a Liberal Arts Education**

All of the respondents commented that study abroad was an important part of their liberal arts education. When posed with the question, “How do you feel study abroad fits into your liberal arts education?”, all respondents shared their own

definition of liberal arts education. Some of the key phrases that were reoccurring in their responses are as follows: establishing a good foundation; becoming well rounded by studying a broad scope of different topics; broadening your world view; finding your interests; and opening your mind up to the world and different topics.

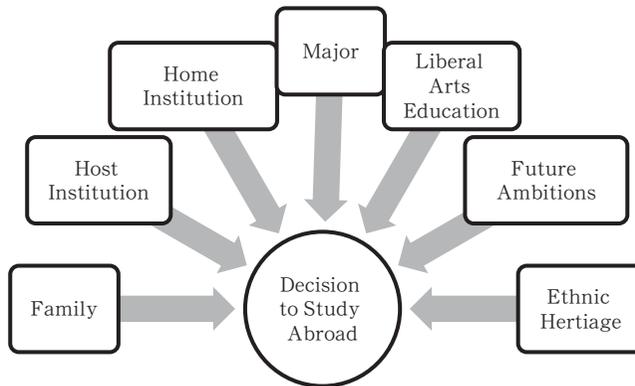
When the respondents elaborated on the meaning of study abroad within the context of their liberal arts education, many of the same words and phrases emerged repeatedly in each interview. Table 1 lists the reoccurring ideas expressed by the respondents. All of the phrases overwhelmingly refer to international and intercultural competencies the students hope to acquire during their study abroad. This finding strongly supports study abroad as a strategy to cultivate individuals equipped with intercultural communication skills and a global perspective for global human resources (Daly & Barker, 2005; Kean & Hamilton, 2008).

**Table 1** *Study Abroad in a Liberal Arts Education*

Phrases Associated with Study Abroad in a Liberal Arts Education
Increase independence
Think more globally
Gain a new academic experience while attaining personal growth
Self-discovery and role within the world
Challenge personal views and continually push to understand different cultures
Erase stereotypes and negativity
Cultivates open-mindedness
Essential to receive a well-rounded liberal arts education
Broaden horizons
Part of the overall circle that is liberal arts and what it all contains
A piece of one of many aspects that is required for a liberal arts education

## Discussion and Conclusion

The salient findings identified, as illustrated in figure 1, from the qualitative empirical data collected through in-depth interviews reveals that study abroad participants are generally optimistic about their study abroad prospects and envision their study abroad as both an academic sojourn and a personal sojourn. According to Nyaupane et al. (2010), American students are motivated by non-academic desires for international travel rather the traditional benefits highlighted by institutions as academic and career oriented. However, the findings of this study contradict this and finds that students study abroad not only for a personal sojourn but also for academic, future prospects, and intercultural and international mindedness. This finding may be the influenced the academic emphasis placed upon study abroad in liberal arts college and academic majors relating to the host country and/or region.



**Figure 1** *Individual Rationales for Study Abroad*

While the empirical data did not identify major concerns or barriers to study abroad, it should be noted slight concerns about transfer of credits towards major, financial matters, and life in their host country were raised by several respondents. However, as a result of their home institutions general supportive atmosphere, these issues did not hinder their participation in study abroad. None the less, it is worthwhile for institutions to better address these issues and provide further support for students in order to facilitate study abroad for all students. This conclusion is further supported by Garver and Divine (2007) that advocate for institutions to recognize the needs of their students and design programs to meet the students' needs as a way to increase study abroad participation rates.

The inquiry into the role of study abroad in a liberal arts education resulted in a unanimous recognition of study abroad as an integral part of their liberal arts education and the importance of cultivating international and intercultural competences through studying abroad to become a global citizen. This finding may be a result that many of the respondents identified that their home institutions and academic advisors highly advocate for participation in study abroad programs. Therefore, study abroad becomes a natural component to a liberal arts education.

Within the internationalization of higher education, there is a strong emphasis on study abroad as a means to promote international understanding and intercultural competencies. There also is a great importance placed upon study abroad as an integral component of a liberal arts education to provide students with a global outlook, intercultural competence, academic growth, and personal sojourn based on the empirical findings of this study. Both individuals and institutions recognize the need of international understanding and intercultural competency in order to compete in the global knowledge economy. Strides are being made in the internationalization of liberal arts colleges. By taking into consideration the needs of their students and individual rationales in the decision-making process for study abroad participation,

liberal arts colleges can weave internationalization and study abroad into the fabric of their institution.

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