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## Study Abroad - Your Future Self Will Thank You

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# Study Abroad—Your Future Self Will Thank You

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Students and faculty from Lindenwood University in Paris, France.

**C**omfortable shoes: Check. Negative COVID test: Check. Sixteen excited students: CHECK! After a year of planning and three years of COVID delays, we were finally ready to take our first study abroad trip to London and Paris to study the History of Psychology in Europe. It was an extended delay of gratification exercise, but in the end, it was totally worth the wait. We will outline the benefits of study abroad experiences, how to locate opportunities within and outside of your university, and how to make the most of your experience traveling abroad.

## Benefits of Studying Abroad

Whether a short-term trip or a semester abroad, the benefits of studying in a different country are limitless. Beyond learning a new language or gaining cultural knowledge, studying abroad provides transformative learning that benefits your academic growth, interpersonal development, and career paths. Students who study abroad gain intercultural competence, which can be demonstrated cognitively (e.g., understanding cross-cultural practices), affectively (e.g., gaining empathy, cultural sensitivity),

and behaviorally (e.g., developing skills necessary for navigating cross-cultural contexts; Goldstein, 2022). Students, teachers, and mentors are working toward the APA guidelines for the psychology major. Specifically, study abroad opportunities align with the APA goals 2.5 “Incorporate sociocultural factors in scientific inquiry” and 3.3 “Adopt values that build community at local, national, and global levels” (APA, 2013). This interpersonal growth can also extend beyond what you may learn in your psychology courses. A study by Earnest and colleagues (2016) found that psychology students who studied abroad had significantly higher cross-cultural adaptability—specifically emotional resilience and perceptual acuity—than students in domestic courses that included cultural content (i.e., Cross-Cultural and Industrial/Organizational Psychology).

Furthermore, research supports that globe-trotting can increase interpersonal growth by fostering a deeper meaning in life and forming new interpersonal relationships (Seifen et al., 2019). We will talk about how to nurture social relationships next, but as an example, one student on our recent trip commented, “I feel very proud of myself that I was able to push through my shyness in a group of strangers and build connections with my peers.”

These are also employable skills; cultural immersion can increase creativity and cognitive flexibility (Moran et al., 2009). Employers recognize that intercultural competence is necessary for communicating within and navigating a diverse global workforce (Zayac et al., 2021). Whether you are headed to graduate school or industry after graduation, cultural competence is a valued skill in mental health services, community work, human resources, and research, among others.

What's more, there is also evidence these gains stick with people long-term. Follow-up surveys, some up to a decade later, indicate study abroad trips influenced students' career paths and continued global engagement (Berg & Schwander, 2019).

To this end, we assessed these constructs in our own students this summer and found that, although our small sample ( $N = 16$ ) did not have significant gains in intercultural communication or self-efficacy, they did demonstrate some trending differences in sociocultural adaptation and identity salience. Students felt more confident in navigating cultural differences as well as a deeper attention to their lived experiences and social interactions. Our qualitative data supports this as well, as students commented, "I feel like I was able to work on certain skills (e.g., being able to adapt to surroundings, accepting change to plans)" and "I learned just how adaptive I am and that I deal with change much better."

## How Do You Locate International Education and Study Abroad Opportunities?

If you're considering traveling abroad at some point during your college career, you might be curious about how study abroad might work with your individual degree program. The first place to start looking for international study or internship opportunities that fit with your major is the study abroad office at your home college or university. These offices are often housed near other experiential learning offices on campus such as Career Centers, Student Organization Offices, or Experiential Learning Centers on campus.

Most study abroad offices maintain a listing of programs that campus faculty are offering each academic year. They also provide information regarding how to transfer your study abroad credits from outside institutions and count those credits toward your degree. Keep in mind that individual opportunities may vary each year, depending on travel constraints and faculty availability. For example, at our home university, some faculty take students abroad every year, but they mix up the international location for each trip.

Many students worry about how they can fit international experiences into their everyday lives. Fortunately, there are a wide variety of options regarding the length and type of study abroad programs. If you have daily responsibilities that make it difficult to be gone for weeks, months, or semesters at a time, you might consider presenting at an international conference, which typically only requires a few days to a week of travel. One excellent option is the International Convention of Psychological Science, which occurs in alternating odd numbered years. The American Psychological Association website also maintains a list

of yearly international conferences that represent a broad range of subspecialties in psychology.

Another option is to sign up for a *short-term study abroad* opportunity. These faculty-led programs typically range from one to four weeks and may or may not involve a course component that takes place at the home institution, followed by a travel component. Some programs have a specific theme that mirrors an academic focus. For example, our course is the History of Psychology in Europe, and it counts as an elective in our psychology major or minor. Other programs may consist of service learning or community outreach in various regions around the world. Still, others might involve interdisciplinary interests and combine students from a variety of majors or universities.

If you have more flexibility in your life, you might consider a *semester- or year-long study abroad* experience. These programs usually involve taking courses at a host institution outside your home college or university. Often, the specific courses that you take at the international university will need to be approved through your home institution prior to leaving for your semester abroad.

- What if your home college or university does not have a study abroad office? Not to worry—you can still find study abroad opportunities by visiting the websites of various organizations that facilitate study abroad experiences, independent of your home university. We recently had a student complete a semester abroad at the University of Stirling in Scotland, an opportunity that he located through browsing options through the University Studies Abroad Consortium (USAC; <https://usac.edu/>). This non-profit organization offers more than 50 study abroad opportunities in 26 countries. Other study abroad and international internship organizations include
- CEA Study Abroad (<https://www.ceastudyabroad.com>),
- the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE; <https://www.ciee.org/>),
- Education First (EF; <https://www.efcollegestudytours.com/>),
- the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES Abroad; <https://www.iesabroad.org/>),
- International Study Abroad (ISA; <https://www.studiesabroad.com/>), and
- the American Institute for Foreign Study (AIFS Abroad; <https://www.aifsabroad.com/>).

Finally, students often tell us that they would love to study abroad but wonder how they can afford to pay for the experience. For travel to international conferences, many colleges and universities provide travel grants to students who are presenting their research. Additionally, Psi Chi members are eligible to apply for [Psi Chi Unrestricted Travel Grants](#) for conference presentations, which provide up to \$1,500 per grant.

For study abroad experiences, your home institution's study abroad office will likely have information regarding scholarships or financial aid sources that are available to support student travel or study abroad. Outside of your institution, many study abroad organizations offer scholarships, grants, or financial assistance,



as well as financing options that allow students to spread out their payments over time. Semester- and year-long programs often are all-inclusive in terms of travel, tuition, room, and board, and can be comparable to what you might spend at your home institution for a semester of study.

## Making the Most of Your Trip

We also want to offer some life hacks for making the most of your study abroad experience. Drawing from research in positive psychology, we know that gratitude, savoring, and nurturing social relationships are some of the biggest predictors of happiness (Lyubomirsky, 2008). Studying abroad provides opportunities for these happiness-inducing strategies with a little planning. Furthermore, positive psychology teaches us money does not buy happiness, but the best investments we can make in our happiness are our experiences, such as traveling.

To practice gratitude, it would be helpful to think about journaling before, during, and after your travel. Studying abroad requires one to be open to new experiences—as the language and food may be very different. We encouraged our students to have an open mind and avoid rigid expectations. One example of this was a curry dinner we experienced in London. Many of our students had not tried Indian food before and were hesitant. However, after trying something new and authentic, particularly by stepping out of the tourist zone, it became one of our most memorable meals.

To best nurture social relationships, connect with your travel mates prior to departure. Start a group chat, so you can also discuss shared expectations, concerns, and packing lists! On our trip, we

had a GroupMe thread where everyone could chat, and we uploaded our pictures to [Photo Circle](#) (a group photo-sharing app). Both these platforms enabled greater shared communication and attachment among the group; Photo Circle was a wonderful way to see the trip from each others' perspectives (we ended with 897 shared pictures!). Built into our course was an assignment to select up to three photos representing students' understanding of international or cultural issues, increased flexibility, open-mindedness, and/or skill development (adapted from Williams, 2009). This might have been our favorite assignment! To see the students' photojournalism on their national identity, art, food, transit, and architecture was remarkable, and truly demonstrated their growth across the trip. Don't worry, there were still lots of IG and TikToks posted, too!

Speaking of pictures, one of the best ways to savor is to reflect on pictures from the trip. We printed some of our students' pictures (mentioned above) and hung them outside our corridor of offices. The research is also very clear that to get the most out of your study abroad experience, you should immerse yourself in the culture. Avoid just being the tourist. We asked our students to interview local residents to better understand intercultural communication. Another student who spent a semester abroad recommended, "Every time you want coffee, go to a new place. That's how you'll be introduced to a broad range of individuals leading their day-to-day lives."

In conclusion, we hope you pack your bags and seek out study abroad opportunities—as a college student, it is one of the best gifts you can give yourself.

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