

Running Head: INTERNATIONAL PR AND STUDY ABROAD

Teaching international public relations through study abroad programs; what is the value for future public relations practitioners?

Tom Isaacson
Ph.D. Student
Advertising, Public Relations, and Retailing Department
College of Communication Arts and Science
Michigan State University
E-mail: isaacs10@msu.edu

Abstract

This survey of undergraduate students (N=88) in an introductory public relations course evaluated participants' knowledge of key aspects of international public relations. At many universities across the United States, study abroad programs are one of the most popular methods of providing students with international experience; yet little is known about the benefits and barriers that influence study abroad decisions. More specifically in the public relations field, little is known about students' understanding of how culture, media, politics, and economics impact international public relations practice. This study evaluates awareness of key aspects of international public relations and explores differences between students who intend to study abroad and those who do not intend to study abroad.

Teaching international public relations through study abroad programs; what is the value for future public relations practitioners?

The need for increased education and research on the topic of international public relations is well documented (e.g., Newsom, VanSlyke-Turk, & Kruckeberg, 2001; Pratt & Ogbondah, 1996; Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003; Wakefield, 1996); and the results of increased attention will be beneficial to scholars, instructors, students, and practitioners. However, although the need has been recognized, actual attempts to address the need in the public relations field have been limited. As Sriramesh (2003) notes “there is a scarcity of published literature on international public relations in general” (p. 507). Additionally, the paucity of international public relations courses remains an issue at United States universities (Pratt & Ogbondah, 1996; Sriramesh, 2003; Taylor, 2001).

One way universities have responded to the need for increased international education, not only in public relations but also in related and unrelated disciplines, is by developing and promoting study abroad programs. A 2006 study from the American Council on Education, which gathered data from 1,070 U.S. colleges and universities, found that 91 percent of institutions now offer study abroad options, up from 65 percent in a 2001 study (Fischer, 2008a). Similarly, the Institute of International Education reports a 150 percent increase in student participation in study abroad over a decade ending in 2006 (Fischer, 2008b).

The recent growth in programs that provide students with international experience is driven by widespread agreement among academic, business, and political leaders that it “is one of the best ways to produce globally literate citizens” (Fischer, 2008c). As recently as 2007, U.S. Senators Dick Durbin (Illinois) and Norm Coleman (Minnesota) introduced legislation that, had

it passed, would have provided resources to send one million American college students abroad over 10 years. In academia, the belief in such programs is so strong that a small number of U.S. colleges have gone beyond simply advocating the programs to experimenting with mandatory study abroad requirements for incoming undergraduates.

Specifically in the public relations field, increasing study abroad participation among students has been advocated as one of a number of ways to improve multicultural public relations education; other methods include building a multicultural body of knowledge, building a multicultural curriculum, and increasing faculty exchange programs (Sriramesh, 2003). Even in instances when alternative routes to international education are advanced (e.g., international public relations courses, second language acquisition), study abroad programs can be used to meet many of the same learning objectives. Pratt and Ogbondah (1996) advocate courses as a way for students to improve formal knowledge of the world, learn about other cultures, and to prepare for global business challenges. If designed appropriately, a study abroad program may be more effective than domestic coursework due to the immersion in another cultural environment. Although the programs, under the right circumstances, can significantly improve the international and multicultural awareness of participants, Newsom et al. (2001) accurately focus attention on the following issues:

Global education for public relations is in its infancy, but demand for such education is critical ... In addition, there are today's students from the United States who are studying abroad, traveling abroad, or perhaps even doing internships abroad without any forewarning about what to look for as they function in their new environment. (p. 658)

The warning draws attention to multiple issues in international public relations education. First, public relations study abroad programs need to be designed to permit participants to

maximize their pre-departure preparations, to ensure that appropriate knowledge and skills are emphasized and developed during the program, and to teach ways of applying the experience to an internationally oriented public relations career. Second, introductory public relations courses within university curriculums should address international issues that are particularly relevant to the field. Third, because of the lack of study abroad programs designed specifically for public relations students, it is likely that many students will participate in programs in related academic disciplines (e.g., communication, journalism, marketing, advertising, social science). While participation in a related program can be worthwhile, it is also possible that students will not be exposed to the particular international issues that are critical to a global public relations education.

Consequently, an important first step for public relations scholars is to determine students' initial knowledge levels early in their public relations education, before they make choices about study abroad program within and outside of public relations departments. To determine the key knowledge areas critical to the practice of international public relations, we turn to recently published material in the field.

International Public Relations Research

Existing public relations research focused on international issues reveals a number of key variables. Sriramesh and Vercic (2003) draw from recommendations of contributing authors around the world in the *Global Public Relations Handbook* to focus attention on a country's infrastructure, societal culture, and media environment. Focusing on these variables helps to provide "a significant first step toward building a comprehensive knowledge base of international public relations" (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003, p. 1). The pertinent infrastructure components include a nation's political system, economic development, and activism levels.

Societal culture is explained using Kaplan and Manners (1972) four determinants of culture – technoeconomics, social structure, ideology, and personality – and Hofstede’s (1980, 2001) five cultural dimensions – power distance, collectivism, masculinity-femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation. Additionally, the influence of societal culture on corporate culture is discussed. The media environment is described through media control, outreach, and access.

Identification of these variables is generally consistent with recommendations by a cadre of public relations scholars. Newsom et al. (2001) state:

... that public relations education must include a knowledge of, and an appreciation for, diverse socioeconomic and political systems as well as an understanding of the impact that these systems have on cultures and on media that are used to communicate in these cultures. (p. 650)

Other scholars have similarly argued for some or all of the same topics. Wakefield (1996) includes cultural theories and communication theories with a media focus in his argument for theory building in international public relations. Pratt and Ogbondah (1996), while developing an argument for the inclusion of university courses in international public relations, emphasize preparing future practitioners through a better understanding of political and legal structures, national economic systems, cultural awareness, and operations of the media abroad. Vasquez and Taylor (2000) use Hofstede’s cultural dimensions in a study investigating the influence of cultural values on the U.S. approach to public relations. The authors summarize the article by noting “practitioners and scholars alike must appreciate and be able to account for the presence of culture if they seek to fully understand American, and eventually, international public relations” (p. 446). This view is consistent with Sriramesh and White (1992) who believe

practitioners' success communicating with publics in a global environment is driven by cultural sensitivity and a willingness to use adaptive public relations techniques.

Research Questions

Using the framework advocated by Sriramesh and Vercic (2003), with a particular focus on the variables appearing most often in the public relations literature, an approach that emphasizes culture, media, politics, and economics is appropriate as a way to evaluate the knowledge levels of public relations students. In addition, based on the recent growth in popularity of study abroad programs as a path to international education, the programs provide a context for evaluation. Because no existing studies determine base-level knowledge of public relations students, the following research question is posed:

RQ1: Are public relations students aware of the key knowledge areas – culture, media, politics, and economics – that should be focused on to maximize a study abroad experience?

It is unknown if public relations students differ in their perceptions of the benefits and barriers associated with study abroad programs. In this study differences are evaluated through comparisons of students who intend to study abroad and those who do not intend to study abroad during their undergraduate education. This leads to the following research question:

RQ2: What differences exist between public relations students who intend to study abroad and those who do not intend to study abroad?

Previous research comparing students who studied abroad to students who had not studied abroad revealed mean group differences in attitudes toward other countries and the United States (Carlson, Burn, Useem, & Yachimowicz, 1990). Although it is not known if the same differences exist between students who intend to study abroad and those who do not intend

to study abroad, the topic is worth measuring as a possible indicator of individual differences. As a result, the following research question is posed:

RQ3: Do public relations students who intend to study abroad differ from students who do not intend to study abroad in attitudes toward foreign countries and the United States?

Methods

A survey instrument was developed for implementation in an introductory public relations course designed to measure knowledge of key aspects of international public relations and to evaluate study abroad intentions. Initially participants were asked about previous study abroad participation, interest in study abroad, and study abroad intentions. Those who indicated study abroad intentions were asked to identify the perceived benefits influencing their decision. Conversely, participants who do not intend to study abroad were asked to identify perceived barriers influencing their decision. An open-ended item asked students to respond with up to four of the most important topics public relations students should learn about when participating in a study abroad program.

Items from study abroad research completed by Orahood, Kruze, and Pearson (2004) were adapted specifically for public relations students. Using five-point Likert scales, participants' interest in current events, international affairs, international education in public relations, the value of international experience on resumes and in job interviews, interest in working for a U.S. company with an international focus, interest in working for a multinational company, and interest in working in a foreign country was evaluated.

Items developed by Carlson et al. (1990) to evaluate students' attitudes towards other countries and the United States were used to determine if differences existed between intended

study abroad and non study abroad participants. Topics addressed by the items included higher education, government foreign policies, cultural life, media, customs and traditions, treatment of immigrant groups, social structure, and social programs.

The survey instrument was administered in class to students enrolled during the spring semester in an introductory public relations course. A majority of the students were underclassmen in the communication college at a large Midwestern university.

Results

The survey was completed by 88 students in an introductory public relations course. Participants included 15 freshmen, 34 sophomores, 26 juniors, 12 seniors, and 1 graduate student. The average age was 20.26 and 70 females and 18 males participated. Eight students had already studied abroad, 46 indicated intentions to participate in a program before graduation, and 34 do not intend to study abroad.

The first research question was evaluated by measuring participants' ability to identify key knowledge areas critical to the practice of international public relations. Culture, the most frequently identified variable, was listed by 53% (N=47) of participants. The other three variables were rarely identified. Media was listed by 11% (N=10) of participants, politics by 3% (N=3), and economics by 2% (N=2). Of the 52 different students who correctly identified at least one variable, a single student correctly identified three variables and 7 students identified two variables. Among the 8 students that correctly identified multiple variables, one was a previous study abroad participant.

The second research question dealt with differences between the students who intend to study abroad (N=46) and those who do not intend to study abroad (N=34). The means of students in response to interest in international affairs were compared using a one-way ANOVA. No

significant difference was found ($F(3,76) = .446, p > .05$). Responses to the value of international education in public relations were also compared using a one-way ANOVA. No significant difference was found ($F(4,75) = .085, p > .05$). Finally, means were compared in response to interest in working for a multinational company using a one-way ANOVA and no significant difference was found ($F(4,75) = 1.134, p > .05$).

A second method of evaluating differences between groups was to examine responses to affirmative and negative study abroad intentions. Among students who plan to study abroad, Table 1 shows frequency responses to a question regarding study abroad intentions. When asked to choose the most important reason for studying abroad, the most common response was to gain travel experience (96%) followed by improving career prospects (91%). Frequency responses for students who do not intend to study abroad are summarized in Table 2.

TABLE 1

Reasons For Study Abroad Intentions

	Yes	No
Use/improve a foreign language	10 (22%)	35 (78%)
Improve career prospects	41 (91%)	4 (9%)
Learn about another culture	36 (80%)	9 (20%)
Travel experience	43 (96%)	2 (4%)
Recommended by friends	29 (64%)	16 (36%)
Recommended by family	18 (40%)	27 (60%)
Friends will be on same program	8 (18%)	37 (82%)
Learn course material not offered at current university	9 (20%)	36 (80%)
Make friends from another country	19 (42%)	26 (58%)
Learn about family heritage	4 (9%)	41 (91%)
Other	2 (4%)	43 (96%)

TABLE 2

Reasons Why a Student Does Not Intend to Study Abroad		
	Yes	No
Might delay graduation	23 (68%)	11 (32%)
Not required for curriculum	10 (29%)	24 (71%)
Cost	22 (65%)	12 (35%)
Do not expect it to help career	4 (11%)	30 (89%)
Dislike foreign travel	1 (3%)	33 (97%)
Personal safety concerns	1 (3%)	33 (97%)
Family obligations	3 (9%)	31 (91%)
Work obligations	10 (29%)	24 (71%)
Other	8 (24%)	26 (76%)

The third research question examined if differences existed among students planning and not planning to study abroad based on their attitudes toward other countries and the United States. This approach replicates a similar analysis by Carlson et al. (1990), although they compared students who had already studied abroad to a control group. Participants were asked to write in the foreign country they were the most familiar with, then respond to 8 items about the country on 5-point Likert scales ranging from highly positive to highly negative. The most commonly named countries were England (22%), Canada (15%), Germany (9%), France (8%), and Mexico (8%). The group means for each of the items are included in Table 3.

TABLE 3

Attitudes Toward a Foreign Country and the United States

	Foreign Country Mean	U.S. Mean
Higher education		
Intend Study Abroad Group	2.05	1.46
Not Studying Abroad Group	1.79	1.41
Government foreign policies		
Intend Study Abroad Group	2.52	2.46
Not Studying Abroad Group	2.21	2.74
Cultural life (e.g., art, entertainment)		
Intend Study Abroad Group	1.64	2.00
Not Studying Abroad Group	1.53	1.53
Media (e.g., TV, radio, Internet,)		
Intend Study Abroad Group	2.11	1.76
Not Studying Abroad Group	1.91	1.85
Customs and traditions		
Intend Study Abroad Group	1.77	2.30
Not Studying Abroad Group	1.94	2.21
Treatment of recent immigrant groups		
Intend Study Abroad Group	2.73	3.02
Not Studying Abroad Group	2.44	3.15
Social structure (e.g., family,)		
Intend Study Abroad Group	2.09	2.39
Not Studying Abroad Group	2.06	2.15
Social programs		
Intend Study Abroad Group	2.27	2.59
Not Studying Abroad Group	2.50	2.74

Discussion

The results of this survey provide useful information for public relations scholars, instructors, and study abroad program leaders. After evaluating participants' knowledge of important aspects of international public relations practice, students in an introductory course showed a limited understanding of the key areas. While slightly over half of the participants named culture as an important topic for public relations students to learn about when participating in a study abroad program, the number of students able to name media, politics, and the economy was dramatically lower. The low awareness levels of these key aspects of international public relations are not overly surprising; after all, survey participants are in an introductory course. However, this does not mean the results should be taken lightly. Already 8 students in the course have studied abroad and 46 more (52% of respondents) intend to study abroad before finishing their undergraduate degree. A number of those students expect to participate in programs during the summer semester 2009. If students are unaware of what they should be learning from study abroad programs that will assist them in future public relations careers, their ability to present the experience effectively on resumes, to discuss it appropriately in job interviews, and, most importantly, to understand how it can be applied to entry-level jobs in the field will be limited.

The key knowledge areas – culture, media, politics, and economics – have been identified and their application to international public relations promoted by numerous scholars in the field (e.g., Newsom, VanSlyke-Turk, & Kruckeberg, 2001; Pratt & Ogbondah, 1996; Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003; Vasquez & Taylor, 2000; Wakefield, 1996). These topics need to be included in introductory courses to increase awareness among students beginning their public relations education. In addition, public relations academics who lead study abroad programs should

incorporate elements into their program design, and academics who advise students on study abroad topics should recommend programs that provide the greatest benefit.

The most common reasons cited by survey participants for not studying abroad were concerns about delayed graduation and costs. The graduation concerns can be addressed in two ways. First, programs should be promoted among young students to increase awareness of opportunities before graduation conflicts emerge. Second, study abroad coordinators and academic advisors should consider how credits can be obtained that will apply to the core of a student's public relations major or minor. Program cost is a more difficult issue to address. International travel is expensive and, consequently, so are study abroad programs. However, efforts should be made to identify funding options and scholarship opportunities. Without significant efforts to address study abroad costs, the programs run the risk of being socioeconomic differentiators among students. Not only are some students missing out, the public relations profession suffers from missed opportunities as well.

Close examination of attitudinal differences between students who plan to study abroad and those who do not reveal limited differences. In today's society, most students are aware of the importance of international business and diverse media options provide them with opportunities to expand their worldviews. This increases the importance among public relations faculty and practitioners of helping students to overcome barriers that are limiting international education.

Future Research

This study begins to address a gap in international public relations research. It provides a starting point for future evaluations of study abroad as a method for improving students' global perspectives. Due to the uniqueness of the institution where this research was conducted – study

abroad is heavily promoted by the university and the number of campus-wide participants is high for a public university – similar studies should be conducted at other institutions. In addition, a logical next step in the research process is to conduct pre- and post-test evaluations of public relations students participating in study abroad programs. A better understanding of what appears to be the dominant solution to international education at universities across the United States is essential to our ability to improve international public relations.

References

- Carlson, J., Burn, B., Useem, J., & Yachimowicz, D. (1990). *Study Abroad: The Experience of American Undergraduates*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Dozier, D. M., Grunig, J. E., & Grunig, L. A. (1995). *Manager's Guide to Excellence in Public Relations and Communications Management*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Fischer, K. (2008a, May). New report reveals mixed results in colleges' efforts at international education. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 54(38), A24.
- Fischer, K. (2008c, June). All abroad! Overseas study required. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 54(41), pp. A1, A20.
- Fischer, K. (2008b, November). For American students, study-abroad numbers continue to climb, but financial obstacles loom. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 55(13), A24.
- Hofstede, G. (1980). *Culture's Consequences*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations Across Nations* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kaplan, D., & Manner, R. (1972). *Culture Theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Newsom, D., VanSlyke-Turk, J., & Kruckeberg, D. (2007). *This is PR: The Realities of Public Relations*. Belmont, CA: Thompson Advantage Books.
- Newsom, D., VanSlyke-Turk, J., & Kruckeberg, D. (2001). International public relations: A focus on pedagogy. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *Handbook of Public Relations* (pp. 649-658). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Orahood, T., Kruze, L., & Pearson, D. (2004). The impact of study abroad on business students' career goals. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 10, 117-130.

- Pratt, C., & Ogbondah, C. (1996). International public relations education: U.S. issues and perspectives. In H. M. Culbertson & N. Chen (Eds.), *International Public Relations: A Comparative Analysis* (pp. 381-395). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Sriramesh, K., (2003). The missing link: Multiculturalism and public relations education. In Sriramesh, K., & Vercic, D. (Eds.), *The Global Public Relations Handbook: Theory, Research, and Practice* (pp. 505-522). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Sriramesh, K., & White, J. (1992). Societal culture and public relations. In J. Grunig (Ed.) *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* (pp. 597-614). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Sriramesh, K., & Vercic, D. (Eds.). (2003). *The Global Public Relations Handbook: Theory, Research, and Practice*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Taylor, M. (2001). Internationalizing the public relations curriculum. *Public Relations Review*, 27, 73-88.
- Vasquez, G., & Taylor, M. (2000). What cultural values influence American public relations practitioners? *Public Relations Review*, 25(4), p. 433-449.
- Wakefield, R. (1996). Interdisciplinary theoretical foundations for international public relations. In H. M. Culbertson & N. Chen (Eds.), *International Public Relations: A Comparative Analysis* (pp. 17-30). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.