Summary of Follow-up Study of “Multidisciplinary Studies in India”, MSU Study Abroad Program

Brief Summary

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The MSU “Multidisciplinary Studies in India/New Delhi” semester-length study abroad program was designed as an experiential learning experience. Originally it was conceived as a faculty led program. An MSU faculty member who had served in the American Peace Corps in India and had participated in a number of University research/consulting roles since led the program. It quickly became evident that resident faculty from the host institution, Lady Irwin College of the University of Delhi could handle the in-country organization and management of the program very well without the MSU faculty presence. An added bonus of this arrangement was that the students learned to rely on resident staff rather than MSU staff. As a result the MSU faculty member’s role changed. She would arrive in India about one month into the program, stay to verify internship placements and host a mid-semester seminar and then return to Michigan. The structure of the program consisted of a brief orientation period in Delhi, a one-month set of language training and lectures highlighting issues of development in India, a six-week internship experience working in Non-governmental Organizations (NGO’s) in either Delhi or at remote desert or mountain sites, and two sets of seminar/reflection experiences. Students from any major (and any University) could participate. The program required 12 semester credit hours of MSU coursework. Both the second level IAH and ISS general education courses were offered plus various independent study and internship courses. The program was initiated in Spring 1998 and continues to the present. During the fall of 2009, a brief “follow-up survey” was designed to elicit information about student’s (now alumni) reactions to the program and how it may have impacted their lives. Sixty-one students had been enrolled in the program during the period 1998 to 2008, an eleven year period, but addresses were sadly out-of-date.

Methodology

Over the years, as students contacted the MSU program coordinator, lists of e-mail addresses were updated. But this never included all of the students. Also five of the students had no “home address” on record, so they were lost to future contact. Of the 56 remaining students, an e-mail solicitation was sent to those with other-than-MSU addresses, or a postcard was sent to the “home address” of record to ask parents to forward our request for contact with the alumni in question. We did get about 5-6
student contacts because of these requests, but a large group were never heard from...so it is uncertain if they were aware of the study or not. Twenty-eight alumni student participants (50%) returned the electronic survey. It is from this group that the responses are summarized in this report.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years since Studying Abroad (SA)</th>
<th>Return to India Since SA</th>
<th>Participated in other SA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Years</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>% of sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 or more years</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-6 years</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-3 years</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The final respondent sample is more representative of the more recent groups, as would be expected due to difficulty in keeping in-contact. Fifty-three percent of the 1-3 year participants responded compared to 52% of the 4-6 year participants and the 44% of the 7 or more year participants. Of the entire group, 14% had returned to India and 28% had participated in more than one MSU study abroad program.

One question in the survey asked respondents to judge the extent of the impact of the experience in India. Sixty one percent noted strong impacts and additionally 39% indicated some impact. But the open ended responses best represent the intensity of these impacts. The reactions of these alumni suggest that the study abroad program was widely regarded as instrumental in changing lives, impacting career paths and strengthening cross cultural sensitivities. Alumni had constructive criticisms of the program and were honest in expressing frustrations and uncertainties while participating...but invariably they suggested that these challenges were worthwhile and that the entire experience was transforming. The individual responses to the various inquiries are presented in the full report unedited and in-total. The reader can then reach his/her own interpretation of how these responses might compare to other reports of the impacts of study abroad. It should be noted, however, that a repeated connection between the structure (especially the internship experience) of the program and the impacts of the program is significant!

See themselves Differently: Did you change anything about your life or yourself upon return?

This question elicited the most euphoric expression of “impacts”. Participants recognized significant changes in themselves and in their lifestyles upon return (although many admitted that they tended to back-slide on some changes in lifestyles). Dramatic changes were reported such as, everything about my life changed after I returned from India. If you ask my parents they will still say they picked up a different daughter at the airport. I’m not willing to say India was the whole cause of change; India was the pivot for the change, the trigger for the unconscious. There was so much I experienced in India that would not allow me to live as I was living before; my life has, in a way, begun from my return; to the more modest admission that, Not really…..it was my lifestyle that led me to India in the first place. But the majority of responses indicate significant and life-changing impacts.
- I felt like India brought me out of my shell. I entered the country shy and confused about the direction my life should take and which faith if any to follow. I left knowing that whatever happened, I’d be fine. I stopped worrying and felt like I could do anything.

- I was profoundly changed by my experiences in India, the true extent of which has yet to be realized. India is something I can envision being a part of me for the rest of my life… presently 2½ years since I my last visit, I long for the sensory overload, the serene beauty, the vigorous intellectual climate, and the population of ultimate diversity which India offers to those willing to commit themselves to her.

- *I do believe very strongly that EVERY student should be required to study abroad as part of their graduation requirements. It is a life changing experience and helps shape global citizens.*

Thinking back to the years you spent in college and the activities you were involved in, what impact has each of the following had on your life? (percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Strong Impact</th>
<th>Some Impact</th>
<th>Little Impact</th>
<th>No Impact</th>
<th>Not Applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Athletics/intramural sports</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>51.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community service/volunteer work</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coursework</td>
<td>66.6</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fraternity/Sorority</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendships/student-peer</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction with faculty</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>55.5</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internship (in the U.S.)</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>37.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious organization</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>48.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student clubs</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>48.1</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student government</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>57.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study abroad</td>
<td>96.3</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work/employment during college</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of twelve aspects of college life, the *study abroad* experience was judged to have the strongest impact of any other activity (96.9%). Second to study abroad was *interactions with peers* at 77.8%.

**Voluntary Simplicity:**

Alumni reported practicing “voluntary simplicity” in their lifestyles as follows: 35.7% to a large degree, 53.6% to some degree, 7.1% very little, and 3.6% not at all. When asked if the study abroad experience influenced them to change or intensify their practice, alums responded: 21.4% to a large degree, 64.3% to some degree, 10.7% very little and 3.6% not at all. Therefore 89.3% reporting some or large degree of practice and 85.7% suggested that the study abroad experience influenced them to some or a large degree. A large number of alums saw themselves as already practicing “voluntary simplicity” in their lifestyles and attributed the study abroad experience as having an influence in changing or intensifying their practices.
Career Choices: Did your thinking about your studies, your career choices or your employment change in anyway upon return from India?

This question elicited strong evidence of both “confirming” interests and in “changing” interests. Interesting a large number of returnees pursued international work experiences, AmeriCorps, the Peace Corps or graduate school! All of these choices reflect comfort in working in less familiar settings, in pursuing elements of service and in making an impact on critical issues in society and in the world. Many attributed their internship experience as having an impact on their career choices.

- I think it enhanced my choice to go into social work, but did not change it.
- I’m not sure that India was the reason I chose to live abroad for a few years or not. I’m sure it had some sort of impact, but I would say that choosing a destination such as India for a study abroad program reflects an already established desire to see the WORLD.
- Greatly, my experience fostered my desire to work abroad, and to pursue work in maternal, child health.

Frustrations: India can be frustrating and difficult—were you frustrated? What disturbed you? Did the coping change you in any way?

Alums reported that they were frustrated while living in India: 29.8% to a large extent, 63.0% to some extent and 7.1% very little. Some of the frustrations centered on uncertainties in program expectations and operations, but most centered around the culture of poverty and being a foreigner in such a society. Another source of frustration for some of the women students, were the attitudes of men in relation to women. However the large majority found these frustrations to be tolerable and even beneficial in helping them to understand different world views.

- Yes, I was very frustrated. Not having control over anything around me, being sick, getting parasites, having bed bugs, people staring at me like I was from Mars. This all annoyed me. Towards the end of the trip however, I completely “let go” and there was a major shift on how I related with India, others, and myself. I’m still asking myself whether completely “letting go” is a true solution to adjusting to another culture, or just a “quick fix” for short term visits.
- I had a love-hate relationship with India for the entire time I was there. I loved the spirit and vibrancy of the country and its peoples but I loathed the degree of poverty that exists amongst some communities. I disliked its culture towards women. I felt it to be quite repressive, and I felt frustrated with a community that was patriarchal to the point that girl-children were deemed valuable to the society only when they were producing male children.
- Through most of the semester, both on campus and at the internship, plans were changed without us students knowing exactly what was going on or the logic behind it. That was difficult especially in an
unfamiliar, somewhat scary environment. But I think it allowed us to get more comfortable in adapting to new situations. By the end of the semester, I was comfortable navigating the country by myself.

**Comfort Zone:** The MSU program attempted to challenge your comfort zone, both in terms of material comforts and level of structure. How did you respond to these challenges?

Respondents recognized that they were being challenged. Some admitted that it was difficult to cope at the time, but in hindsight can be viewed as beneficial. Most expressed thoughts about growing, maturing and adapting—all useful to face later life challenges. Those who expected more structure and order in their lives were either pleasantly surprised with how quickly they adjusted or regretful that they had to spend their time coping. But in both cases, participants felt that they grew in patience, independence and acceptance.

- When I look back at my first time in India, I recall the excitement with which I embraced the lack of material comforts. I thrived on the ‘newness’ of everything and enjoyed having my comfort zone challenged. As a student of anthropology I strived to understand and participate in the everyday life of people I encountered and I believe that my experiences have been beneficial on both a personal and academic level.
- I was certainly put in very-far-from-comfortable experiences that I was not otherwise used to. I feel it was a good test for myself and a way to teach me that there are many things I do not need to live with.
- I liked the loose setting. Compared to other programs I heard about, I felt that this program was about India. It gave us the room to learn what we wanted and I think it was very beneficial.
- I enjoyed the little and big challenges of staying in India. I thought the program offered me a chance to independently work through the difficulties but also offered support if necessary. Through the experience I am a far more confident traveler. And I feel that I could live in a variety of places with a lack of resources comfortably.
- Frustration often arose because I felt there wasn’t enough guidance at the beginning of the course and that I was wasting a lot of time looking for information in the wrong places. It wasn’t until we began volunteering for CHIRAG during the last month that I felt some purpose to being in India. I didn’t know then how to deal with the frustration, but if I were to go back now, I would not have worried so much about my grades and I would have tried to be more present in the moment.

**Other International Travel:** Have you had, or plan to have, further international travel or job related experiences? If yes, did India influence you to pursue any of these experiences?

Almost universally respondents reported having caught the “travel bug”! Many have experienced a lifetime of travel already and others have plans to do so in the future. But an important element of this enthusiasm for travel is the fact that it reflects a strong sense of confidence in self, a thirst for exploring out-of-the-way places, and an interest in sharing and learning from others. Some commented that they were pleased to have the flexibility to travel during the program which gave them skills and confidence to travel on their own, in India and elsewhere in the world.
Yes, definitely! I’ve visited Africa, which reminded me a lot of some of the areas in India. I’m not sure whether India influenced my desire to travel entirely, but it definitely intensified the passion for seeing other cultures and being comfortable with being uncomfortable. I plan to do much more travel when I can afford to do so.

I definitely plan to travel internationally again after grad school, when I have a more stable income—to Japan, Southeast Asia, and back to India. I’m open to, but not pursuing an international job; but I’m certainly more comfortable speaking across cultures.

Civic Engagement: Young people are increasingly becoming engaged in civic activities (volunteerism, philanthropy, policy advocacy, etc.) When asked if their study abroad experience influenced them to change or intensify their civic engagement practices, alums noted only some or little influence: 10.7% to a large degree, 53.6% to some degree, and 32.1% very little and 3.6% not at all. Some of this response reflects strong existing tendencies toward engagement and other to current limitations or lack of flexibility in life situations.

I have always had that passion but the trip just re-enforces and intensifies that.

I think my choice in India is more an outgrowth of my civic-engagement ethic than a source of it. The idea of interning with an NGO was a big reason I went. It definitely made concrete the problems of the developing world, but I think I had the civic-engagement ethic before I went.

Yes, yes, and yes! Having been witness to the struggles that so many women in India have to overcome just to raise their children and provide for them, and yet the belief they have in themselves and their voice has inspired me to believe in my own. Last year I took part in a political fellowship through the Center for Progressive Leadership. This training taught me about the history of Arizona politics, how to run a campaign, run for elected office, fundraise, the importance and how to of community organizing, and how to lead a nonprofit or community organization.

Have you had any cross-cultural relationships that have been changed or intensified by your study abroad experience?

Some respondents interpreted this question in relation to relationships developed while in India, and others interpreted it very broadly. In both cases, respondents recognized their increased interest in and ease in interacting across cultural backgrounds. Some recognized the importance of these cross-cultural skills for jobs and employment in a global economy.

The most evident one that comes to mind is the relationship I have at work. My employer is Indian and we often work with Indian contractors. The knowledge I gained about the culture has allowed me to have stronger working relationships.
I think every experience abroad can teach us something about ourselves and where we come from. In that way, my time in India has continued to influence my cross-cultural experiences. Each experience builds upon the previous.

World Citizen: Do you feel like a “world citizen” after India? Is a semester abroad enough time or a significant enough experience to do so? A few of the respondents felt that the study abroad experience was too short to develop such feelings, but others were vocal in announcing that YES, they did think of themselves as world citizens and that even a shorter period of time abroad would suffice if minds were open. One particularly important comment centered on the experience as helping people see themselves and the cultural “blinders” that they live with as Americans.

- I definitely feel like the world is becoming smaller and it is important to go abroad and have these experiences to open your eyes to reality. I do feel a greater connection to humanity as a whole. It is really easy to sit in our American bubble and forget that there is a whole world out there.
- I am a world citizen, just as I was before my study abroad. I am perhaps more aware of this now.
- I do. I think that a semester is a minimum amount of time needed to start to really absorb a different culture. I think that with the “comfort zone” challenges, this study abroad was a significant enough experience to make the students feel like world citizens.
- Definitely. Three months is a long enough time to see that a lot of the assumptions we make about the rest of the world might not be true.

Choice of Partner: Does having an international experience make a difference in your choice of, or relationship with, your partner? Although some respondents could not identify with marriage yet, most felt that, at a minimum, their future (or current) partner needed to be interested in the world and willing to travel. Many also felt it necessary for a partner to have had travel experiences as a common element of their relationship.

- I suppose someday I may get married, and all of my international experiences are a part of who I am, so I think it does make a difference in whom I would have a relationship with. Basically, I would want my partner to have an open mind regarding the rest of the world, as I do from my various international experiences.
- Absolutely. I’m not married, nor dating. But it has a huge influence on who I’m attracted to and how much I feel I have in common with them.
- Having an international experience does make me believe that the person I marry can certainly come from a very different background than my own.

Encourage children: When a parent, will you encourage your children to travel and study abroad? The question received universal agreement that children should have travel experiences early and throughout their youth. Some even wanted to be able to live abroad with families so that their children could grow in sensitivities to language and cultural issues.
Yes, most definitely, I think it’s an essential part of growing up and learning about the world and yourself.

Definitely. There’s no way to underststate the importance of a global education in today’s economy, I think that’s only going to be more apparent in my children’s lifetimes and I intend to give them as much international exposure as possible.

Changes: What changes would you suggest; want to do differently? Most respondents noted very specific actions that they would have done differently, but many wouldn’t have done anything differently. Most were pleased with the program and appreciative of the unique learning environment that they experienced.

I would like to have spent more time at my internship site, I felt like I was just there long enough to really know how to maximize on the resources there when I realized my internship was winding-up!

I wish I had stayed there (in India) even longer. I stayed for another month; I should have stayed for the entire summer. It is so cheap to live out there and I am not sure that I will ever have the chance to be out there for the same amount of time ever again in my life!

I should have spent more time talking to Indian students. I was uncomfortable being one of two guys on an all-girl’s campus, and I didn’t fully understand how different inter-gender taboos were in India. I’m a shy person by nature anyways, so I didn’t initiate as many conversations as I should have to get a sense of what my peers in India were like.

I cannot think of a single thing I would have done differently. The 2004 semester abroad in India was a marvelous first trip that set in motion a lifelong interest in India, traveling, and involvement in global issues. I am grateful for having had such a valuable international experience at such a young age.

Other comments about the program or its impact on you: Alumni provided a wide range of heart-felt and thoughtful responses to this open-ended inquiry. All were positive, appreciative and reflected humility. As noted below, many of these comments would make great PR headlines!

Overall, I think that India was a very positive experience in my life. I believe that it helped make me a more caring, conscious, and enlightened citizen. I wish I could make studying abroad to developing nations a mandatory requirement for a college degree. There are serious problems in developing countries that have a very real impact on our lives in America, and I wish that our society could learn about them first hand rather than hearing about them in a 30 second clip on CNN or Fox News.

I think this is one of the strongest study abroad experiences at MSU. Its intensive, immersive design is structured to really push students academically and emotionally, and it’s made a huge impact on me as a person growing my strengths and opening my eyes to many pertinent world issues that I am hoping to explore further in my career. I had many peers in college who did an undergraduate study abroad experience that really only translated into an extended vacation. I think that is such a loss of a great learning opportunity.

I loved the study abroad experience even though at the time it was difficult and challenging. I would do it again in a heartbeat!

I believe the independent studies/internships were extremely useful. I liked that I was able to be with other MSU students for one of the internships and for the second go on my own to a smaller NGO. I
thought Mary and Anjali had really good connections that enabled us to meet a variety of people and experience a fair amount of the country. I really appreciated the opportunities the study abroad afforded me.

- I think the best way to sum it up is, before I went to India I was asleep, on return I was wide awake. I would not like to know what my life would be if I did not have that experience. It should be noted, that after the program I spent a month in Goa, which certainly must have contributed to my dramatic change. When I think back to when I returned it was really quite hard dealing with the reverse culture shock. I sat in the Detroit airport, staring at a paper cup completely flabbergasted that after I was finished I was going to throw it away. So much of our Western world makes no sense when compared to the lives of those millions. We take everything for granted; India showed me how to treasure as much as I can.

**Summary**

For some of the respondents it had been eleven years since their studies in India…and for others, as little as one year. As a reader of these results one might be skeptical about how such time-lags may have influenced the comments. Likewise many respondents had additional international experiences in the interim…serious international experiences such as the Peace Corps or Teaching Abroad! As a result this sample is now a very internationally experienced group…not just a returned study abroad group. But it is humbling to see how carefully the respondents tried to focus on their experiences in India and to supply specific comments about those experiences. In that regard these comments can be considered valid.

These responses confirm the widely held assumptions that study abroad is a transformational experience. Alumni noted strong influences on their personal lifestyles, their careers, their family expectations and on their role in the world. As in all groups, some expressed less enthusiastic reactions to their experiences, but the large majorities were positive about the structure of the program, the caring nature of the supervision and the breadth of their interactions with Indians and India. Universally they became world travelers, in mind if not in action. Of particular note is that at least five returnees subsequently joined the Peace Corps (a sixth in application); at least six joined the AmeriCorps and one is currently an administrator in that program; and numerous others traveled to Asia as Teachers of English as a Second Language. These ideas of service did not originate in India, but the study abroad experience confirmed to these individuals that they could survive and thrive in these service settings, thus giving students the impetus to follow their dreams. India was frustrating and difficult…a challenge to comfortable lifestyles and a contrast to strongly held opinions. It is in such challenging settings that students can learn about themselves, and develop the patience and understanding to feel comfortable in a foreign culture. And the study abroad experience in India did just that. It opened doors to greater cross cultural sensitivity and to appreciation of different world-views (about poverty, gender relations, class/ caste, etc) –important educational experiences for the global economy and the diverse society of our future.