

Summary

Over a decade ago, MSU started its first-year seminar abroad (FSA) initiative to connect an existing campus model to a study abroad experience. This new model reflected efforts to internationalize the first-year experience and increasing the number of first-year students participating in study abroad programming, which has been low historically.

The MSU FSA model involves a 10 - 20 day summer experience prior to and extending into the start of the fall semester. A typical program is led by two faculty members and a student affairs support person. After spending several days at a campus orientation, the group travels to the international location, and while abroad, students spend 2 – 3 hours a day in a classroom and the rest of the day participating in field visits. Field visits are designed to support (1) the seminar theme, (2) cultural learning, and/or (3) exploration of local highlights. FSAs require that the team design pre-departure, field-based, and re-entry activities for students, as well as attend faculty and staff development sessions.

Starting in 2013, program administrators sought to institutionalize the seminar by connecting it to general education and embedding learning outcomes assessment, in addition to program and instructional evaluation. This change coincided with the FSA program linking to, and now fulfilling, a University general education requirement.

In 2014, course-based assessment evolved based on feedback from 2013 that the institution was over-assessing students. In response, program administrators combined multiple assessments—including a marketing survey, student satisfaction survey, program evaluation, and instructional rating—with embedded learning outcomes assessment in the form of critical incidents. The incidents required students to respond to an issue related to study abroad that could provide evidence of their analytical thinking, cultural understanding, and integrated reasoning abilities. Students completed the instrument during the campus orientation and again during fall semester at the end of their class.

Information from assessment efforts will inform practice for the next year. First, it feeds into the institutional accreditation and program review process in terms of student learning outcomes. Second, it helps shape faculty development and program design, and finally, it influences student orientation design and marketing.

Evidence

The FSA assessment effort have always included multiple data points focused on understanding the student experience, faculty experience, learning outcomes, and issues related to program design. The major changes to this process are the focus on learning outcomes and combination of several surveys and evaluations into a single instrument.

Elements—yearly or regularly—included in the assessment effort include:

1. Analysis of participants' demographics (i.e., gender, major, SES, and geographic residence)
2. Statistical comparisons of participants to non-participants
3. Student program evaluations (program logistics)

4. Student instructional ratings (course content, organization, and instructional effectiveness)
5. Student and faculty focus groups
6. Student and faculty surveys
7. Transcripts of group discussions that connect students' experiences abroad to their first-year campus experiences
8. Pre/post surveys of student's global learning (as connected to institutional learning outcomes)

Starting in 2014, we combined elements 3 - 8 into a single pre/post assessment for students. The faculty surveys and focus groups are still separate.

Examples of evidence collected this year and in the past suggest that these programs:

- Provide students with academic and personal self-confidence, and ease the transition to college by providing peer and adult support networks;
- Alter students' perceptions of their academic ability and the effort required to be successful in college—including the willingness to seek out assistance and use office hours;
- Contribute to students' global awareness and interests, including their interest in continuing to pursue international study and/or engage in real-world problems;
- Support students' interest in and ability to interact with people who are different from themselves;
- Cause students to rethink their major and life-focus and become aware of a wider range of major and career options;
- Enhance first-semester performance, when controlling for students' academic, financial, and demographic characteristics;
- Decrease student attrition (participants are less likely to drop out), when controlling for the variables noted above; and
- Enhance four-year graduation rates (participants are more likely to graduate in four years), when controlling when controlling for the variables noted above.

Beyond the impact on students, program assessment data has led to the following changes in the programs:

- Implementation of mandatory faculty and staff development sessions;
- Changes to student orientation, including the format and length of orientation;
- Creation of pre-departure information materials and on-line support;
- Augmented student acceptance notifications, including a scripted call to each student as they are admitted; and
- New faculty and staff recruitment practices.

Broader Implications

Originally the FSA program "assessments" were student satisfaction surveys, but over time, we realized that this data was insufficient to improve student learning. Now the programs has a variety of tools that

include the elements noted above, and the data collected from these efforts have resulted in several advancements.

First, the assessment efforts have directly influenced how we design and implement the programs. Some of these were discussed above, but four examples of ways data has led to programmatic advancement are:

- The decision to create a mandatory 2 – 3 day orientation (previous to this change, orientation was one day, optional, and had no set structure).
- The decision to use institutional instructional ratings (not normally used on study abroad), require faculty and staff development (previously none), and offer stipends for faculty and staff leaders (previously volunteer-based).
- The alignment of the FSAs to the general education learning design and outcomes, allowing students to substitute their FSA course for an approved general education course (previously an elective).
- The change in the course design to be a three credit class instead of a two credit class.

Second, the FSA data has led to new ideas for working with first-year students on campus. Research conducted about the students' needs, learning, and experiences abroad have been translated back into other first-year programming, curricular and assignment designs, and support services. Specific examples include creating workshops to train advisors about preparing students for experiential learning, using Career Services techniques and theories to connect international experiences back to students' majors and careers, and bringing student and academic affairs together to talk about high-impact pedagogies as retention tools and methods for collaborating on designing and implementing these programs.

Third, the FSA programs also model best practice in study abroad and international education. Other study abroad programs and experiential efforts have adapted the faculty development program, assignments, and re-entry efforts created for this program.