

Study Abroad Models of the Future

Pointers on Flexible, Sustainable
and Inclusive Programming

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Introduction

This paper examines various study abroad models in existence, with a focus on transatlantic collaboration while also providing a critical analysis for opportunities and future trends.

The purpose of the white paper is to review the current state of the transatlantic exchange between North American and German universities and to critically examine, analyze and outline the broad strokes of what a potential future vision of this relationship could be. Specifically, this review is aimed towards developing new models that strengthen and enable transatlantic study abroad and provide opportunities for reflection, change and inclusion. The paper delves into what are and could be the learning outcomes of study abroad.

Typically, the study abroad programs are student-centric models that are customized based on university agreements, geographical limitations and other factors. We have made a full attempt to highlight the most common models in use by our various institutions and the specific challenges and opportunities they offer. While this paper is not an exhaustive collection of models, we are considering the most utilized options for student mobility.

Keeping in mind the current crisis globally - traditional norms, conventions and structures around business, international relations, socio-cultural markers, as well as teaching-learning methods have been disrupted. The institutional stakeholders in the higher education landscape are evidencing their capacity and ability to pivot the standard models in order to respond to the needs of the time. This

disruption, which in many ways could be equated to a creative destruction space, has enabled a space for new opportunities for engagement and innovation. Through this paper we are exploring the core takeaways that can positively impact higher education institutions that participate in study abroad programs.

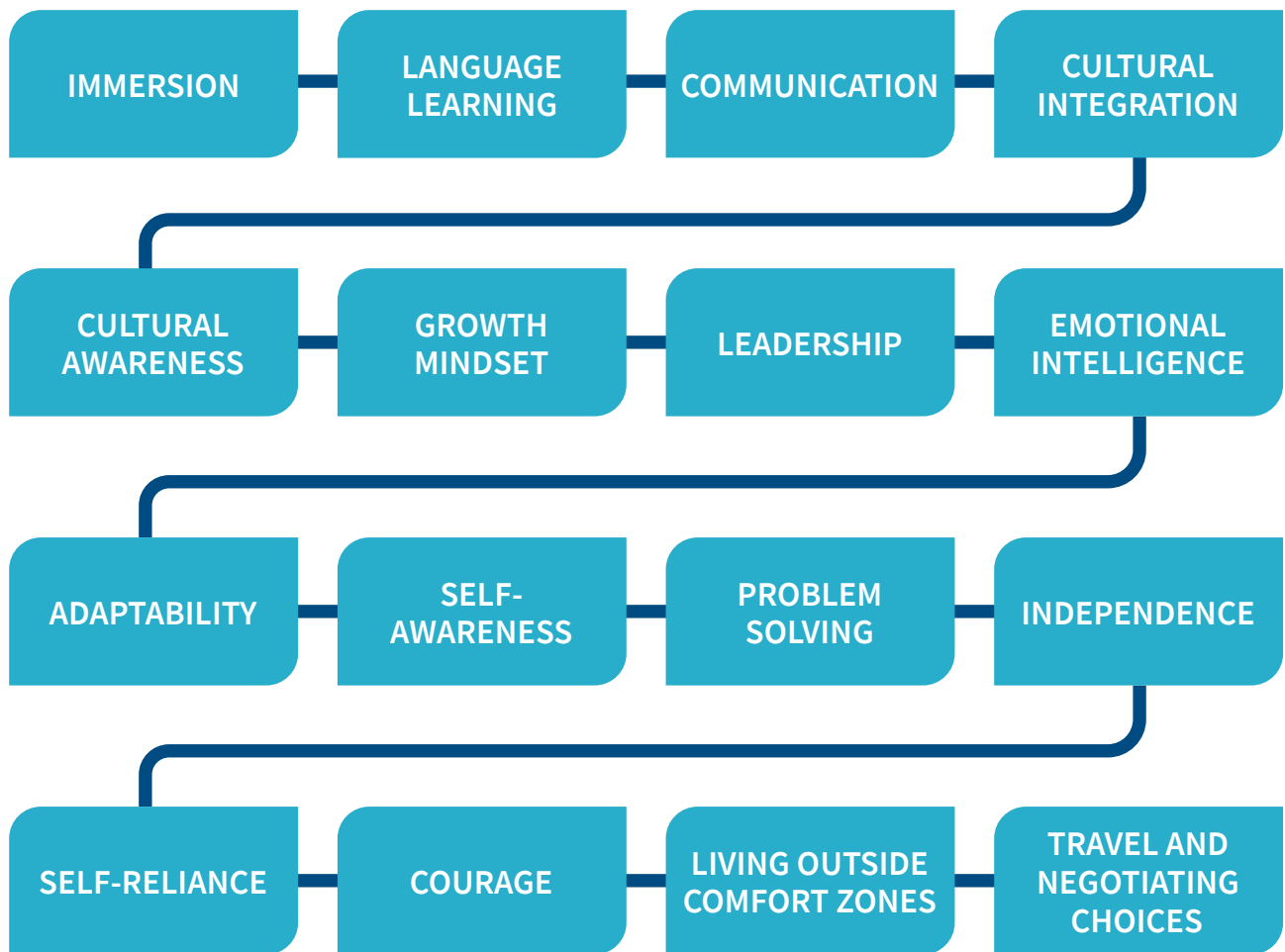
Our paper also highlights the values and life skills (learning) students receive from their experience of studying abroad. According to the [Institute of International Education](#), "Study Abroad is one of the best ways students can acquire global skills and open up personal and professional opportunities." Historically, study abroad students have better employment prospects after graduation, [AIM Overseas](#) highlights that more than 60% of employers agree that an "overseas study experience is positive on a resume".



This paper operates on the assumption of the inherent value of study abroad (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Example of Values of Study Abroad



Background

Contextual Challenges and Opportunities

Supported by massive, dedicated federal and state programs, academic internationalization from the American perspective has spiked in recent decades. Transatlantic academic mobility was trending upwards: Over the past 20 years, education abroad more than doubled. (IIE) The predominant study abroad fields were the STEM fields, making up 25% and Business & Management as the second most popular with 20% (2017/18), even though study abroad interest shifted from traditional one-semester and one-year study abroad experiences to more short-term programs and internships.

By March 2020, the abroad experience industry had grown exponentially, with countless opportunities offered via universities and third-party providers. However, international mobility came to a grinding halt during the COVID-19 crisis, which is still going on at the point of this writing, and its future shape is somewhat [uncertain](#) at present.

International mobility and exchange have never been without challenges, especially between the United States and Germany, but now long-term, systemic challenges are merging with short-term ones, forcing internationalization into a kick-start mode, and opening new possibilities.

In the following we will list a few of those well-known challenges to international mobility to outline and frame the priorities for the way forward.



Known Challenges To International Mobility

PANDEMIC

COVID-19 requires physical distancing measures, leading universities in both United States and Germany to shut down parts of their Spring 2020 and Fall 2020 national and international programming, including study abroad opportunities. At the time of writing this, Spring 2021 programming remains uncertain.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Transatlantic exchange happens across an ocean, with environmental implications. Including non-mobility based, virtual formats may lower the environmental impact of international education but at the same time, carry with them their own challenges.

COSTS

Study abroad is expensive for all students because of the financial and logistical costs of living abroad, and the opportunity costs of generally not being able to work during physical exchanges. Costs are especially high for students in the United States, because of the tuition-centric model, which requires them to continue paying tuition at their home campuses while studying abroad. Some of the costs may be mitigated through organizations supporting exchange (DAAD, DFG, Fulbright, US nonprofits and university grants), but full cost coverage often is not achieved. Study abroad in the United States is also expensive for students from Germany because living (and studying) costs are much higher with limited scholarship opportunities. Finally, study abroad is also expensive for universities, which maintain infrastructures and require program funds for these opportunities; that is a problem especially for universities in the United States which are more competitively organized than Canadian and German universities.

ACCESS

Expensive exchange costs bear on equal participatory opportunity among groups who are traditionally underrepresented in international study abroad programs, for example, based on class, race, gender, and ability. Diversity and inclusion at a university level require proactive and affirmative actions which in turn make the programs more expensive. Opportunity: restructuring of universities and university funding of study abroad towards more inclusive measures.

POLITICAL

International education and higher education are under political fire in the US. While having only limited mandates over concerns related to higher education, federal policy decisions may target universities through spending patterns and visa regulation decisions, such as recent changes in student visa and work regulations for foreign students.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Study abroad is more integral to student life in Germany than it is in the US. This is not only supported by more comprehensive public funding of such programs, serving as a political statement, but also reflected in language access. The different languages are barriers and incentives of study abroad at the same time. Even though it is difficult for both sides to navigate administrative systems and culture in the other language, the barrier is higher for English-speaking US students, as German is a less common language than vice versa.



Fig. 2: The Challenges of Traditional Study Abroad

CHALLENGES	UNITED STATES	GERMANY	OPPORTUNITIES
Environmental Impact	Transatlantic exchange happens across an ocean, with environmental implications.		More virtual formats address this issue
Costs for students Environmental Impact	Travel, health insurance & cost-of-living abroad, costs of non-work while abroad		Virtual, hybrid models & blended mobility formats lower each of these cost items
	Tuition-centric model	Generally free for students (paid for by German taxpayers) or low fees	Hybrid models add study abroad flexibility
Costs for universities	High associated infrastructure costs; programs more endangered on the US side because of competitive university landscape.		Re-prioritize international education; virtual formats and hybrid models lower costs.
Access	Expensive exchange costs bear on equal opportunity participation in exchange programs based on class, race, gender, and ability.		The introduction of hybrid, blended formats with emphasis on barrier-free technology may make access easier on all levels.
Cultural	Study abroad is less common in the US because of cost factors.	Study abroad is more integral to student life in Germany than it is in the US.	The introduction of hybrid, blended formats may make access easier on all levels.
Political will & uncertainty	Study abroad and higher education under political fire in the US, affecting visas & status.	Broad uncertainty over the near future of transatlantic exchange	The proliferation of hybrid, blended formats may serve as flexible tools to counter political decisions that threaten international education.
Pandemic	Physical distancing measures shutdown of academic programming, including study abroad, with uncertain duration		Increased virtual formats



Implementation

Challenges and Opportunities

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted higher education in general and international education specifically. Only a few universities and program providers had the infrastructure in place to pivot towards virtual study abroad experiences.

Most institutions were cornered into providing and implementing virtual exchange opportunities in the form of hybrid models and/or other creative solutions. Some virtual exchange models quickly emerged as an attempt to save Spring and Summer 2020 abroad programs.

While there are a lot of unknowns, it is safe to say that the disruption caused by the pandemic will have a lasting impact on US higher education and the international education industry.

Administrative and technological challenges

mostly remain the same as they were for traditional, i.e. in-person, abroad programs:

- Academic calendar / scheduling
- Course equivalency and evaluation
- Communication between departments and study abroad offices
- Integrated learning platforms including conference tools and chat services

Virtual abroad models do present **administrative opportunities** that may have an especially positive impact on smaller universities with fewer financial and staff resources.

The most notable opportunities are:

- Once programs and evaluations are in place, streamlined operations save resources
- Departments/universities can offer international experiences, teach relevant skills to more students, i.e. make it more accessible to non-traditional and underrepresented students
- Virtual programs avoid any health & safety issues for students and will reduce resources to complement programs

Fully virtual or hybrid models will likely continue to play a significant role in education abroad. These virtual models pose challenges, but also offer opportunities, to underrepresented students.



Some **new program challenges** emerge that are unique to virtual program opportunities:

- Synchronous face-to-face interactions force educators and students to work and learn outside of regular class hours. This particularly affects the West Coast, and the states Alaska and Hawaii.
- Scheduling issues are a lot more complex – some students may enjoy synchronous teaching because they are in the ‘right’ time zone while others may have no other option but asynchronous teaching.
- In theory, virtual programs are more accessible due to the elimination of travel and a disruption of life at home. In practice, a digital divide emerges as a new challenge. Programs require:
 - a good laptop/desktop,
 - stable internet connection,
 - camera,
 - headset
 - More or less quiet environment or a designated space that allows for uninterrupted virtual learning without disruption to others in the same space who might be dealing with their own virtual environments.

We cannot assume that all students have access to these resources.

- Due to the [difficulty in assessments and monitoring students](#), not all online offers will be accepted for credit.
- Virtual programs can be demotivating for students (and faculty) due to limited internationalization in the curricula and/or practical international opportunities. It also lacks the intentional learning environments such as libraries, campus experience, etc.
- These experiences lack an equalizing agent for e.g. the role of the campus as a provider of common ground.
- Potential risk could be a two-tier system with some privileged students being able to have an on-site campus experience while others can only take advantage of virtual programs.

While new program challenges come up, virtual and hybrid models do also present numerous **program opportunities**:

- Virtual exchange may be more accessible to non-traditional students
- Virtual programs reduce carbon footprint
- Broader global connectivity possible (students from multiple countries and cultures could join programs)
- Beneficial for potentially creating connections, reducing ignorance, stereotypes, prejudices, etc.
- Major professional development opportunities - online skills, teamwork, working in global context (diverse co-workers, languages, adapt to working with multiple time zones, teaching virtually in intercultural contexts)



Survey

of Existing Education Abroad Models

The past decades have seen an increase in study abroad and exchange programs between the US and Germany. Early study abroad programs focused mostly on language learning, while today's programs emphasize intercultural competence, academic disciplines, professional skills and purpose-driven experiential learning.

IIE Open Doors data shows for US students that especially the demand for short-term study abroad options have gone up since the 90s. A little less than two-thirds -- 64.6 percent -- of US students studying abroad go abroad for short-term programs, defined as either summer programs or programs of eight weeks or fewer. Another third (33.1 percent) study on mid-length programs lasting a quarter or a semester, while just 2.3 percent study abroad for a full academic or calendar year. The proportions of students studying on short-term versus mid-length or long-term programs stayed the same from 2016-17 to 2017-18.

The "Open Doors" data only reflect students who study abroad for academic credit. A total of 441 institutions reported that an additional 38,401 American students participated in noncredit internships, volunteering, and research abroad. Around 10% of US students study abroad.

[Wissenschaft Weltoffen](#) counts 6,111 US students at German universities in 2019, accounting for only 2.4% of all foreign students (Bildungsausländer) in Germany. The same study looks at the international mobility of German students or graduates, and a distinction is made between temporary study-related visits abroad and study-related visits abroad with the aim of taking a degree abroad. Degree-related study abroad from Germany to the US makes up 7.2% of this kind of mobility (10,042 German students going to the US in 2017), while 12% of German students go for temporary study visits to the US.



Fig 3.: Transatlantic Education Abroad Models in Practice at our Institutions

MODELS (CAN BE COMBINED)	ABOUT	CREDIT TRANSFER	TUITION	ACCOMMODATION	OTHER INFORMATION
Direct Enrollment in Foreign University	Students independently enroll at a university in the host country without the assistance of the home institution or a study abroad provider, or a formal institutional agreement.	Student is responsible for credit transfer.	Finances go to the host institution.	Students are responsible for logistics (housing etc.).	Full cultural immersion including matriculation in host institutions program and program requirements.
Direct Exchange	Universities exchange students usually under an exchange agreement.	Credit transfers pre-authorized by both institutions	Tuition waivers organized by universities	Housing and logistics might be supported.	Typically, students can choose from a pre-approved list of courses.
Semester Study Abroad Programs	Students participate in a full semester or year abroad at a host institution. These can be hybrid or direct enrollment programs.	Credit transfer is specific to the program.	Variable - home institution, provider or with grants from funding organizations	Accommodation support is provided by host institution.	E.g. Junior year abroad programs

Of Note: This paper does not include study and internship opportunities or faculty mobility.



MODELS (CAN BE COMBINED)	ABOUT	CREDIT TRANSFER	TUITION	ACCOMMODATION	OTHER INFORMATION
Summer/Winter Study Abroad	Describes study abroad experiences based on the time frame of the program. Usually short (3 to 6-week programs) at foreign universities/ institutes. Often language/ area studies programs.	Can be credit bearing	Finances go to the host institution.	Accommodation support provided by host institutions.	Students participate in short term programs that fit their home institution's calendar. Possible DAAD funding: University Summer Course Grant
Island Programs	Programs are provided either by home institutions or study abroad providers. Courses are taught by home institution's faculty or contracted faculty in the host country.	No transfer required as it is within the university system.	Tuition is paid at home institution. The finances stay with either the home institution or the study abroad provider.	Housing is typically supported.	Often the host country's language knowledge is not required and interaction with the host country's student population is not part of the experience.
Blended Programs	Part virtual and part on-site programs.	Credit transfer, logistics etc. depend on individual agreement between participating institutions.	Tuition and fee structure vary depending on customization of program.	Vary depending on the customization of the program. Most programs do not provide accommodation options.	



MODELS (CAN BE COMBINED)	ABOUT	CREDIT TRANSFER	TUITION	ACCOMMODATION	OTHER INFORMATION
Hybrid Programs	“A program that combines two or more of the program types to a significant degree. For example, a study abroad center might emphasize courses just for study abroad participants, but also permit students to enroll in host university courses and to do a credit-bearing internship” (Forum on Education Abroad)	Credit transfer, logistics etc. depend on individual agreement between participating institutions.	Tuition and fee structure vary depending on customization of program.	Vary depending on the customization of the program. Some programs provide housing support.	A hybrid program combines the elements of island programs with elements of the direct enrollment model by offering the student courses designed and executed by the home institution as well as taking regular classes at the host institution.
Faculty-led Study Abroad/Excursions	A program designed and led by a faculty member from the home institution who travels with a group of students abroad. These programs are typically short in duration.	Home institution provides credits.	Finances stay with home institutions.	Typically, accommodation/housing is pre-arranged.	Possible DAAD funding: Group Study Visit
Departmental Visits/Excursions	Departmental visits/excursions led by a faculty member to visiting the partner department at a host institution.	Home institution is responsible for curricular activities and possibly credit points.	Typically, finances are run at cost.	Typically, accommodation is pre-arranged by host institutions.	Host institution is responsible for extracurricular activities and logistics.



Best Practices

The models above share a foundation in physical mobility. Apart from independent, direct enrollment, these models also share a list of best practices that make them the most common and successful models.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Full support and ownership from participating institutions allow programs to run more smoothly and successfully. Institutional support can take many forms, depending upon the model, but collaborating with faculty is always key. For example, a successful faculty-led program requires the ownership and input of the faculty member leading the excursion, while a direct exchange or 1:1 program would require support at many levels of both institutions in order to take place and be successful.

Institutional support can serve to meet challenges that could otherwise prevent a program from being successful, such as issues around tuition, credit transfer, language of instruction, availability of quality subject-area content, and differences in academic calendars.

TRUSTED INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Whether partnerships exist directly between two institutions or between institutions and a third-party program provider, trust is an essential component. Stable partnerships serve as the foundation for long-lasting programs and can be expanded to other departments or faculty to increase cooperation and collaboration between partners. Partner organizations and institutions also serve as the in-country experts for their international partners and help students, faculty, and administration navigate the host country conventions. Finally, partners should work together to establish and trust that each party adheres to ethical practices for student recruitment, selection, and support.

In a hybrid or island model, for example, one institution would have to be willing to allow their partner to have space for students on their campus and access to amenities and utilities. The partner in turn would have to be willing to uphold standards set by the hosting campus around security and academic quality.



STRUCTURED ENGAGEMENT WITH HOST COUNTRY

In order to achieve the desired outcomes of most study abroad programs, programs will provide students with structured engagement with the host country language, culture, people, and institutions. Structured engagement can come from a faculty member leading the program, language courses, host country instructors, international student services, program administrators, in-country liaison offices, or a combination.

INDEPENDENT EXPLORATION OF HOST COUNTRY

Successful study abroad programs allow enough downtime for participants to engage independently with the host country. Direct enrollment models are the most extreme version of this best practice; outside of the general services provided to all international students, students who directly enroll at an international university explore all aspects of student life independently. Other options could include scheduling adequate downtime on a short-term, faculty-led excursion, or housing for students in semester abroad programs in dormitories with host country students.

AFFORDABILITY

Successful study abroad programs are affordable by each country's standards. For example, in direct exchange models, this practice often means that students pay tuition to their home institution so that, as far as the tuition is concerned, the semester or year abroad is not more expensive than the same year at their home institution.

TRAINING ON INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCIES OR GLOBAL SKILLS

The most successful study abroad programs provide appropriate curriculum on global skills. These competencies are not a default result of an international experience, regardless of the model, but are rather the result of intentional curriculum designed to guide students in engaging with their own worldview, biases and assumptions. Depending upon the model, this training can come during the pre-departure phase of any program or be delivered while on program by either home or host country faculty. Studies show that programs that offer before and after fair best.

When examining the models that are emerging or gaining traction during the global pandemic, it is instructive to refer to the best practices for more traditional models. If they are to be successful, implementing institutions will need to ground their blended or entirely virtual study abroad programs in the best practices that have made existing models successful.

These practices may need to be adapted to fit these models—enabling independent host country engagement, for example, may require more scaffolding up front—but they are still applicable. Indeed, even when considering the technology necessary to carry out a virtual program, this decision will need each institution's support, have faculty support, be affordable, trustworthy, and secure, and provide opportunities for both structured and independent engagement for students in both countries.



Medium to Long-term Trends

[Inside Higher Education's Brian Whalen](#) comments that during the COVID-19 global outbreak, “American higher education institutions have an opportunity to reconceive study abroad in ways that continue to make it a high-impact practice” and offers four considerations. These considerations (headlined) serve as interim opportunities for study abroad / international offices to create hybrid and blended spaces for students.

- Online learning and virtual education abroad
- Providing digital environments to mimic study abroad in content as well as other experiences such as virtual internships, site visits, etc.
- Examples of platforms are Google Classroom, Blackboard, Moodle, Canvas, Linkr, COIL, ILIAS, etc.
- Domestic study away
- This model looks at domestic spaces as a travel option for soft skills development
- Faculty-led programming
- Embedding internationalization in the curriculum
- Practicing “education abroad at home” where virtual spaces become collaborative with partner institutions
- Globe education
- Each study abroad program should treat our planet as a ‘beneficiary’ of the program. Recommends that “each student, faculty member and administrator involved in education abroad can offset their environmental footprints.”

Not all of the above considerations refer to online learning. From a transatlantic perspective, we find that higher education institutions in Germany are pivoting towards virtual and blended learning spaces to achieve study abroad objectives.

The institutional strategies focus on long-term partnerships and creating shared internationalization curricula. German institutions are responding to international partners and the flexibility required to work with them. [The German Academic Exchange Service \(DAAD\) opened a tender for virtual academic cooperation \(IVAC\) to address these exact needs.](#) It highlights that, “the abrupt transition from offline to online teaching in response to the COVID-19 crisis has made digital teaching and learning an essential prerequisite for acquiring knowledge and competence.”



From our experience, the medium to long-term strategy from both the United States and German perspective highlights the value of study abroad while meeting the needs of the individual study abroad participant as well as addressing the skills gap in the global workforce. Universities are showcasing their capacity to be adaptable and resilient. Transatlantic strategies for universities involve student centric learning with a renewed emphasis towards practice based soft skills (combination of internships, project-based learning, etc.).

There is a larger presence of micro skills development-based courses that focus on re-skilling to address the workforce gap. We also find that there is a momentum to engage alumni (not as active in Germany when compared to the United States but still very active) and most importantly a collaborative rather than competitive approach to higher education resources. See figure 4.

Fig. 4: Current Trends

STUDENT CENTRIC PERSONALIZED LEARNING

- Emphasis on customized models/hybrid with focus on personalized innovative delivery
- Change in outcome measurement tools away from silo/exam models

SHIFT FROM 'EDUCATING' TO 'UPSKILLING' + 'RESKILLING'

- Utilize study abroad to fill skill gap in current globalized work environment
- Study abroad as an opportunity for professional development

ACTION ORIENTED ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT

- Actively engage alumni base for furthering local-professional experiences
- Use alumni practitioner perspective towards students education

'SHARED UNIVERSITY' ECO SYSTEM

- Develop multilateral relationships with universities
- Create shared resources eco system as institutions go through fiscal crunch



Future Trends

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, physical mobility has come to a grinding halt, at least in the short-term, and we have been forced to rethink what exchange and mobility mean.

- Study abroad never was and never should be a competition between physical mobility and virtual mobility.
- Virtual mobility is not simply “watch and learn.”
- How does virtual mobility work in such times of global crisis?
- Virtual mobility will be used as a practical tool to prepare for physical mobility.
- Assumption that virtual exchange will lead to virtual mobility.
- Digital natives need training to be collaborative in the virtual realm and not just act as consumers.

Physical mobility will not disappear, when it is safe to engage in this form of exchange, but we predict that perhaps it would diminish in length. What else will be the outcome of the pandemic?

- Increase in domestic “study-away” programs
- Increase in faculty-led programs
- Greater attention paid to the environmental impact of education abroad
- Increase in the number of virtual internships
- Even shorter time spent in physical mobility
- Increase in blended learning programs.
- Far less resistance on campus to working in the virtual realm, as there is now a better understanding of what the virtual classroom and experience look like.
- Study abroad is also experiencing “punctuated equilibrium:” long periods of relatively slow change interspersed with occasional moments

of rapid adaptation. The current pandemic is a punctuation moment, a time to reconceptualize and reconceive.

- The new study abroad has the potential to diversify the participating student population to include underrepresented students in study abroad.
- Study abroad will experience the unbundling of pricing and cost allocation
 - a. “Over the next five years, [D’Amico](#) sees a shift happening, where potential students will weigh college return on investment, including the outcomes of the past students, job prospects upon graduation and the overall college experience more seriously than whether a school has a state-of-the-art gym”
- Finally, a higher emphasis will be placed on evaluating international socio and geopolitical trends. Risk evaluation and resilience will be built into the new higher education model. We see a shift from digital infrastructure investment to a critical investment component for the future of higher education institutions.



References

Resource for Relevant Articles

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Websites

- [DAAD](#)
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