What Americans Experience When Studying Abroad

College is a time for people to truly discover who they are. Typically, college students are in the age range of eighteen to twenty-two years old, an awkward and crucial part of anyone’s life. These students are establishing their likes and dislikes, usually by joining a wide array of extracurriculars or becoming members of various programs. Some students decide they want to stay where they are, finding their university to be like a new home, but others yearn for adventure and choose to explore the world through study abroad programs. I am stepping outside my comfort zone and am studying abroad in England at Keele University during the Spring 2018 semester. Studying abroad has been made popular in movies, making it seem that many students do it, but in fact “some 304,000 U.S. students studied abroad for credit during the 2013–14 academic year, which represented about 1.5 percent of all American students enrolled in institutions of higher education that year” (Ungar 3). Even then, “less than 40 percent of Americans hold passports” (Ungar 1). Society is repeatedly shown college students having amazing times overseas, but if this is true then why are there not more people doing it? I currently believe there are three challenges which may make studying abroad not as fantastic as everyone thinks. First, college in general is expensive, let alone trying to go overseas for an extended period. For instance, “Even for students already going to expensive private colleges, a semester abroad can potentially add a couple thousand dollars in addition tuition expenses – and that’s without plane tickets, living expenses, and sightseeing” (Thompson). To go along with it
costing a great deal, our currency is different from those in foreign countries, which would be a difficult thing to become accustomed to. Second, students studying abroad would have to overcome a language barrier. It would be difficult to leave a country where you are the majority, an English speaker, to then go to a place where you now are the minority. Lastly, I suspect students studying abroad will face a culture shock like none other. America, a single country, is loaded with an immense amount of cultures. However, this does not prepare a person for living amongst foreigners. Said person does not know their way of life, such as customs and small gestures. All of this leads me to wonder what some challenges that Americans face when studying abroad are and how students may overcome them.

It seems all people hear today is how expensive college is. The financial burden of college continues to rise from year to year. In fact, “between 2004–05 and 2014–15, prices for undergraduate tuition, fees, room, and board at public institutions rose 33 percent, and prices at private nonprofit institutions rose 26 percent, after adjustment for inflation” (Yoro). Why would anyone want to add to this cost for something such as studying abroad? It costs different amounts for each study abroad programs, but one can “expect to spend about $6,200 - 7,000 for one semester in England after airfare and program fees” (Tuition). I interviewed a co-worker of mine, Collin Newton, who studied abroad in Australia for a semester. I wanted to get his opinion on the living expenses and the potential issues finances may cause for those studying abroad. He told me, “It was expensive. I did everything I could do on the budget, but even with getting the budget car and eating at the cheaper restaurants, things still add up real quick” (Newton). Someone can set a budget for studying abroad, but spending can quickly get out of hand, particularly because currency systems overseas are different from the one in the United States.
The United States’ currency includes printed bills which have on the front some of our historical figures, presidents and other political persons alike. It also has a change system, where different sized coins, made of varying alloys, hold distinct values. Now imagine being a foreigner who travels to the United States and tries to understand our system. It would be very confusing, right? Well, that’s how it is for American students who study abroad: “You start wondering how your usual currency translates into the new currency, how to use a new type of currency, and most importantly, if you’ll have enough money to last your whole trip” (Dunn).

The English use pounds, which are represented both as printed bills and coins. Not only is the representation of money different amongst countries, but its value equivalency constantly changes as well. Felix von Wendorff writes, “in continental Europe, I have to remember that when something costs €1 it is actually US$1.40.” This means someone may think an item costs one U.S. dollar, when in reality it may cost much more based upon the currency exchange at the time. Any trip can be pricey, but “European trips can be especially expensive now, because you’re spending much more on food and essentials than you would back in the U.S.” (Thompson). This cost can be increased even further if one decides to pay for items via credit card. Credit cards may seem to be a nice way of performing transactions while overseas, but said card may have what’s called a foreign transaction fee, which can be roughly three percent of the purchase (What You Need to Know). Credit cards can have other hidden fees as well, such as how “many merchants will offer the ability to charge your purchase in dollars rather than the local currency” (What You Need to Know). This is known as a conversion fee, which can be up to six percent of the purchase (What You Need to Know). Money can cause a lot of issues, both domestically and abroad, so it’s important to recognize the difficulties ahead of time.
Although money can be a challenge for students studying abroad, there are ways to overcome it. Dunn states, “Familiarize yourself well before leaving for your trip with the money you’ll be using in your study abroad country. Make sure you understand how to convert between currencies.” The cost of studying abroad doesn’t have to rest on the students’ shoulders alone. There are many scholarships and financial aid which can help diminish tuition costs (Luget). It can be very beneficial for a student to spend some time surfing through some scholarship websites and applying for them. It may result in saving thousands. Then there is the issue of a credit card. Credit cards may seem dangerous with all of their hidden fees, but Discover suggests you should “check to see which of your credit cards is the most widely accepted abroad and which one carries the lowest foreign transaction fees. If you are planning an extended stay abroad, it may be worthwhile to apply for a card that has no foreign transaction fee at least 30 days before your trip.” Credit cards have useful benefits in comparison to other forms of payment, such as “better exchange rates, fraud protection and the convenience of not having to carry around large amounts of cash during your trip” (What You Need to Know). Dealing with money overseas may seem to be a huge ordeal, but with enough preparation it may be a minimal worry to a student studying abroad.

One part of traveling abroad is encountering people who speak other languages than one’s own native language. One of the main languages spoken in the United States is English, but this is not the case for other countries. For instance, the people of France speak French, Germanic people speak German, Mexicans speak Spanish, and so on. Obviously, the English speak English. However, it is a different form of English. We can even see differences in the English language around the United States. People from Northern states say “pop”, those from Midwestern states say “soda”, and others from Southern states may say “Coke” or “soda pop” to
represent all soft drink products. People coming to the United States could be confused if they heard these different terms, just as Americans may not understand slang words used in England. One such term people in England may say is “piFF”. Guys and girls use this term to say a girl is attractive (Vaughn). Someone could study a language for years, such as through middle and high school, but wouldn’t do well when communicating with foreigners who mainly speak said language because “there’s no real way to teach someone a language such that they can understand every idiom and every element of regional slang that native speakers are used to using” (Dunn).

It is difficult to first get a basic understanding of a language, but then throwing in slang terms makes it even more of a challenge for those studying abroad. Another aspect to consider is a person’s accent. A person could understand the language, gathering a vocabulary including local slang terms, but none of this would matter if said person can’t even comprehend what the natives are saying. As Felix von Wendorff says, one could think “you were fluent, but find you’re unable to understand the strong local accent.” I can’t help but think about this in the perspective of an American talking to someone visiting the United States. Their first language may not be English, and thus they may have a thick accent. It is very difficult to initially understand what said person is saying, as the words being said don’t sound similar to how you are used to hearing them. Having the accent yourself may be frustrating as well. Brooke Axness, a student from the University of Iowa that studied abroad, says, “It is a weird feeling to feel like the outsider and have the tables turned on what you’re used to.” You could be trying to communicate a vital piece of information, or asking an important question, to someone from the native country, and they are simply struggling to understand what you are saying. You have spent a long time studying the language, doing your best to understand the semantics and
grammar of the language, but your inflection and way of speaking can throw the whole conversation away.

Both comprehending and understanding what a foreigner is saying to you is crucial to any study abroad adventure. It’s called a language barrier for a reason. It is something that people can struggle to get passed, but even if it seems impossible, it is possible. Collin Newton, who went to Australia, an English speaking country, said he had difficulty understanding certain phrases and accents. “I go to Australia, and people are speaking English, but we are just not communicating well. That was a challenge I did not expect but encountered” (Newton). Newton’s advice to resolve this issue was “you just have to learn to ask for clarity. ‘Excuse me stranger. You said this and I interpreted it as this. Is that accurate?’ A lot of times they would laugh and say, ‘No, no, no, you silly American,’ and then they’ll correct it for you.” He also suggested that “overcoming it was simply learn that when you say something, what you mean isn’t always what you mean. And when someone says something to you and you take it very offensive, they didn’t mean for it to be offensive” (Newton). Being in a foreign part of the world will push anyone outside their comfort zone, so this is the time to recognize you’ll need to ask questions to succeed and gain what you can from the experience. Yes, overcoming the barrier is difficult, but it results in many benefits for those students that chose to study abroad. As stated in a 2015 article which discusses the benefits of studying abroad, “valuable learning also occurs when students acquire a new language and accumulate hands-on knowledge about the host country. Once international students return home they are more likely to seek out multicultural experiences, careers and organizations where their new second language skills are needed” (Birnbaum 3). These students grew from the challenge and have developed a new sense of self-worth and inspiration. Brooke Axness said that after being the one who struggled to understand
those around her, as well as being the one who people couldn’t understand, she has gained “more of an appreciation for people who must overcome that problem on the daily in the States.” It may seem as if the world is going to end when you meet the first person that can’t understand anything you are trying to say, but the benefits outweigh this and “the language barrier problem also goes away pretty quickly, once you’re immersed” (Wendorff).

My third and last major challenge American students face when studying abroad is culture shock. Every different group of people has its way of life. There are numerous unique groups spread throughout the United States, which is why the country was given the nickname “Melting Pot”, as it is a culmination of different forms of society all thrown together. Although the people of the United States have their own forms of culture and identity, the United States in general has a way of life unlike those in Europe and other foreign countries. For instance, there are differences in legal drinking age. The age at which one can legally drink in the United States is twenty-one, while most other countries have set the bar to be eighteen years old. Going from a country where it is taboo to drink alcohol underage, although many people do it, to another country where people your age, or maybe even younger, are drinking legally must be difficult. Another custom people may not consider as different from one country to the other is how a person shakes another person’s hand, whether that be firmly or softly. Wendorff explains this best when he says, “In the US, a firm if not painful handshake is customary. A person with a non-bone-crushing handshake can be seen as weak. The same does not work in many parts of Europe or Asia, where someone with a vice-like handshake may be perceived as crude or overbearing.” Even little things, such as how one interacts with another person, including body language, can make a difference. A person could simply say “No thanks,” to another person, but
this may offend said person that was rejected. This is because “every nation treats rejection differently…” which means “…you’ll have to be careful when turning down a request” (Luget).

Going anywhere new will require someone to rethink about their way of life. It’s not just the large aspects of life, but even the little things such as when you go into town on a night off. During our interview Newton told me, “Another challenge I faced quite often was not knowing how to go about things. Ordering at restaurants was different. Tipping at restaurants was different. Public transportation was different. So just things that you don’t think about being different. Little things you feel uncomfortable doing” (Newton). This relates directly to what the study abroad program at Rutgers University says students experience when away from their home university. Rutgers has established that culture shock is a cycle, during which time a student will go through four stages, or phases (Culture). These phases are Euphoria, “the initial phase or tourist phase,” Irritation and Hostility, when “you start noticing more and more dissimilarities between life in the foreign country and life at home,” Gradual Adjustment, when “you begin to orient yourself and are able to interpret some of the subtle cultural clues and cues,” and Adaptation, “when you are able to function in two cultures with confidence” (Culture). Newton was describing the Irritation and Hostility phase, when a student begins to realize the new environment is unlike home, which can be intimidating or even scary. Newton went through this phase, as will other students.

Culture shock is an obvious part of studying abroad. It is one of the big reasons why people choose to study abroad. They want to see new parts of life. However, how can most students prepare for the culture shock? Well, there are many different techniques to help students feel ready for the experience. Newton mentioned that he faced struggles throughout his time abroad. He then suggested that “to overcome those it’s as simple as asking for help… asking
often times whoever was around. And what I found was a lot of people were really receptive to it, especially as an international student” (Newton). Similar to what Collin said, Wendorff suggests “An easy way to avoid many cultural misunderstandings is to observe what others do, and how they do it. If in any doubt, just ask! You’ll find most people are happy to talk about their customs, and will enjoy sharing their insider knowledge with you.” Rutgers University also had some very helpful tips for students who plan to study abroad. These include: “Set time aside each day to do something special. Then do it. Keep active,” “Find a place where you feel comfortable and spend time there,” and “If you have certain hobbies or are involved in sports at home, try to do the same abroad. This is the best way to make friends” (Culture). Sure, it’s going to be overwhelming traveling to a new place, full of new people, but going through the cultural shock process is necessary to help gain new perspectives from the experience.

Studying abroad is widely considered an experience of a lifetime and for good reason. There are many conditions which can make or break your trip overseas. One condition is having enough money and knowing how to properly use it during transactions. Another aspect is the language barrier students face. The third and final characteristic of studying abroad which I chose to mention during this paper was culture shock. All three of these can be intimidating if one lets them be. However, there are many strategies which can help reduce the stress these challenges can bring. It’s also important to note that a person should avoid trying to take away all the stress from studying abroad. That is an essential part of the experience! People register for studying abroad not only to get away from home, but to push themselves outside of their comfort zones. What else can push you like going to foreign lands and struggling to comprehend what those around you are saying?
Those studying abroad get to closely inspect the world around them, learning new languages and being immersed in several cultures. Yes, there is no doubt that studying abroad will have its challenges, but it will also have its benefits. “Cross-cultural awareness and competence was considered to be one of the most significant future benefits of studying abroad” (Birnbaum 7). Collin Newton said a positive outcome of traveling to another university is you will get “the opportunity to appreciate your own university” (Newton). It’s a small phrase, but has a big impact. Traveling overseas can mean a lot to someone, but so can the impact of coming back home to friends and family. There will be both good and bad times throughout the experience of studying abroad, but it is important for the person studying abroad to keep an open mind, accept the obstacles, and prepare to have a challenging, unique, and rewarding time outside of reality.
Works Cited


Vaughn, Thomas. Personal Interview. 10 June 2017.

