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The Convergence of Study Abroad Phrasing:
The Imagined Space of Globalization and the Isomorphism of Higher Education in an Expanding World Culture

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> *"The mission of the student exchange program is to help students gain* **understanding***, acquire* **knowledge***, and develop* **skills** *for living in* **a globally interdependent and culturally diverse world**… *The student exchange program is a key component of the international profile of [the] university [and its] partners… to further the* **internationalization** *of their campuses. University students experience* **intellectual, social, and personal growth** *through* **immersion** *into another culture."*
> – Study abroad program description

Abstract

This paper is intended to highlight the case of how study abroad programs are portrayed online by universities. Despite great variety in location, structure, funding, length, and a number of other factors, the programs sound very similar in the way they are described by their websites. This isomorphism speaks to a trend that extends well beyond study abroad and into higher education in general, reflecting the perpetuation of a rapidly expanding world-culture, which despite its seeming anonymity emerges from the influence of supranational and international organizations and then is given local meaning that legitimizes its existence. In presenting this analysis and the network map as a visual example, I aim to bring attention to how universities are partaking in this world culture and the imagined global space through study abroad programming. I recognize the limitations of such a preliminary overview and call for further studies to explore this topic in greater depth.

Keywords: study abroad, phrasing, higher education, globalization, world economy, university web sites, academics

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Introduction

Study abroad programs (used as a general term herein to mean out-bound student mobility sponsored by universities) continue to proliferate as research has aimed to answer questions regarding the programs' content, the internationalization of higher education, and the effects of student exchange. While some of the existing literature attempts to answer how well the expected outcomes – such as language learning, cultural understanding, and global competence – are measured and to what extent they are achieved, there remains thus far, a lack of an exploration of the similarities among the websites of university study abroad programs. At first glance it may appear that these study abroad websites are advertising the programs uniquely sponsored in part by their universities, but closer review reveals a high degree of convergence in phrasing. This convergence is just one of many examples of the increasing isomorphism in higher education that is associated with globalization and internationalization. This paper thus aims to analyze the isomorphism of study abroad phrasing by acknowledging the role of universities in the spatialization of globalization and the capitalist world-economy. This demands an understanding of globalization and internationalization, which I argue is more complete when viewed through the lenses of both World Systems Analysis and World Culture Theory.

Study Abroad: Past and Present

The higher education institution has a long international history traceable to the academic mobility of medieval times. Immediately following World War II, the internationalization of higher education in the United States was dominated by political motives, visible through the European Marshall Plan. During the Cold War, American higher education engaged in oversees activity with the purported goal of promoting peace and understanding while others understood it as an assertion of power and imperialism (Mitchell & Nielsen, 2012). This eventually gave way to an economic rationale motivated by the notion of academic capitalism, which involved the belief that globalization required higher education to

change its goals to mirror the modern market (Mitchell & Nielsen, 2012).

Despite its roots, the international character of universities today has become distinguishably more complex. Study abroad is just one feature of this all-encompassing international identity, which has come, in addition to more traditional scholar exchange, to also include the structural agreements that facilitate the movement of students and researchers, as well as the convergence of course offerings and curricula (Frank, Robinson, & Oleson, 2011). One possible explanation is an increase in the entrepreneurialism demanded of universities as they compete to maintain their share of an expanding global market (Mitchell & Nielsen, 2012). Levy (2003) calls for a more cognizant acknowledgment of the fact that the field of study abroad is driven by a market very similar to tourism and that many aspects of study abroad involve the relationship between consumer and producer. Similarly, Anderson et al. (2006) cite student recruitment as one motivation for the increasing numbers of study abroad programs offered by universities and colleges. Thus, while study abroad may have its roots in historic scholar exchange, it is nothing short of naïve to overlook the economic rationale that has motivated many of its modern identifying features, as it has joined a long list of higher education activities that align with academic capitalism.

Higher Education in a Capitalist World-Economy

It is clear from the rapid increase in study abroad programs worldwide that the notion of academic capital is not unique to universities in the United States. Throughout the world, higher education institutions participate in programs of student and scholar exchange that are expanding rapidly in scope and number and becoming increasingly isomorphic at least in phrasing (i.e., the wording used by universities to frame their study abroad programs online) if not also in structure. Griffiths and Arnove (2015) raise the concern that any discussion of the isomorphism of education is incomplete without the acknowledgment of the capitalist world-economy. They explain that nation-states were created within a growing international system that defined and legitimated their posi-

tions in an expanding capitalist world-economy. According to their version of World Systems Analysis, the participation of nation-states in this world-economy provides an understanding of reality as they compete for shares of global surplus and to improve their positions within the global hierarchy (Griffiths & Arnove, 2015).

As the nation-state is not the sole provider of higher education, it is also necessary to understand higher education's position within this world-economy by analyzing how universities themselves, rather than just nation-states, can assume the role of key actors within this system of competition. Such a system is visible by analyzing the converging discourse on study abroad which is strikingly similar regardless of the culture, language, politics, economy, resources, or geography of the country in which its university is located. Some distinguishable patterns exist, but they do not serve to negate the overall convergence of study abroad phrasing, which by its transcendence of these factors points to their desire to earn, maintain, or improve their position within the capitalist world-economy. Their participation in this world-economy through study abroad is frequently attributed to globalization, necessitating an understanding of this phenomenon and the related concept of internationalization, which scholars argue is both a response to and a stimulus for further globalization (Mitchell & Nielsen, 2012; Matus & Talburt, 2015).

Globalization and Internationalization: A Cycle of Stimulus and Response

Mitchell and Nielsen (2012) importantly distinguish between these two interconnected phenomena of globalization and internationalization. First using a geographic metaphor, they clarify that the former is a common space that neutralizes frames of reference and has at its center the world's universities but that has no borders. Seen from an interactional standpoint, globalization is a process of increasing connectivity that fosters interdependence (Mitchell & Nielsen, 2012). Globalization as both a process and a common space has its roots, according to Mitchell and Neilsen (2012), in changes in communication and transportation that create access to new markets, goods, interactions, and relationships. Higher

education institutions have welcomed globalization and participated in the transformation of education into a product to be exchanged in this global market as they develop a consumerist approach. Thus, this market mentality has necessitated the transformation of education through internationalization, which Mitchell and Nielsen (2012) define as a series of actions chosen by individuals, groups, and institutions with the goal of crossing borders to gain social, cultural, political, or economic benefits. The emphasis is on these actors' agency in engaging in these deliberate choices. In summary, while globalization is seen as something that is happening, internationalization is seen as a response.

In the case of study abroad, higher education institutions are the ones making the decisions to cross borders, although it is important to note that study abroad programs are often framed as a *response* to the increasing internationalization of higher education. By responding with programming that enables the crossing of borders, however, it becomes clear that these institutions are actively contributing to internationalization and to the transformation of higher education into a good for exchange within the globalized market economy. Similarly, as is noted above (Mitchell & Nielsen, 2012; Matus & Talburt, 2015), universities both respond to and stimulate the phenomenon of globalization, enabled by their location as the hub or center of this imagined space, if viewed geographically. However, they remain for the most part unaware of how the choices associated with internationalization reinforce the globalization that has reshaped their environment of higher education (Mitchell & Nielsen, 2012).

While importantly clarifying how universities have helped to perpetuate globalization as a common space and an economic force, as well as internationalization's role as both a response and stimulus, Mitchell and Neilsen (2012) overlook how these phenomena have come to be such widespread "taken-for-granteds." Attributing it to expanding technology in communication and transportation does not entirely explain how these ideas themselves gained momentum in higher education nor how universities' approaches to internationalization became isomorphic in char-

acter. I use the convergence of study abroad phrasing (again, meaning the wording used by universities to frame their study abroad programs online) to illustrate one of countless examples of the isomorphism of modern higher education, which I believe warrants a deeper explanation to prevent the convergence of study abroad phrasing from becoming another "taken-for-granted" in the cycle of globalization and internationalization.

Network Analysis on the Convergence of Study Abroad Phrasing

I have chosen to illustrate the convergence of study abroad phrasing using a network analysis of common themes used by university study abroad websites. I sampled 30 study abroad websites from universities, each one from a different country, and representing six continents. I used the U.S. News and World Reports 2018 List of Best Global Universities as a sampling frame, but this was not intended to be a representative sample, and thus websites were purposively sampled according to the following criteria: their universities had an outbound international student program (e.g., study abroad or Erasmus+ available to students enrolled at that university) at the time of writing and a website responsible for this program, regardless of whether that page was dedicated specifically to outbound study or, in some cases, more generally belonged to office of international relations / affairs / education. For coding purposes, only websites that included a description of at least three sentences dedicated to the mission, available programming, or motivations for study abroad were included in the sample.

For each website in the sample, I coded the descriptions provided about outbound student mobility programs for themes regarding the motivations and outcomes of study abroad. The following themes emerged from my analysis: globalization, internationalization, interpersonal / intercultural communication, cultural immersion (including social or cultural integration), personal growth ("broadening horizons," "comfort zone"), international experience (including "travel"), language learning, academics (including credit and research), global citizenship / global competence, professional development (including "enhance employment op-

portunities"), and exchange of intellectual resources. The most frequently mentioned themes were academics, cultural immersion, and internationalization, with intercultural communication being mentioned the least frequently. However, interesting patterns emerge when the raw data was visualized using network maps through the software UCINET.

The network map provides a visualization of how frequently themes were mentioned together and thus which themes illustrate the strongest convergence. The nodes represent the themes and the thickness of the ties between two nodes represents how often those themes are referenced together. For example, from the thickness of the tie connecting them, it is visible that academics was more frequently referenced together with cultural immersion than it was with intercultural communication. The node of academics is most central to the network, frequently mentioned together with professional growth, international experience, cultural immersion, and internationalization, and only slightly less often with all other
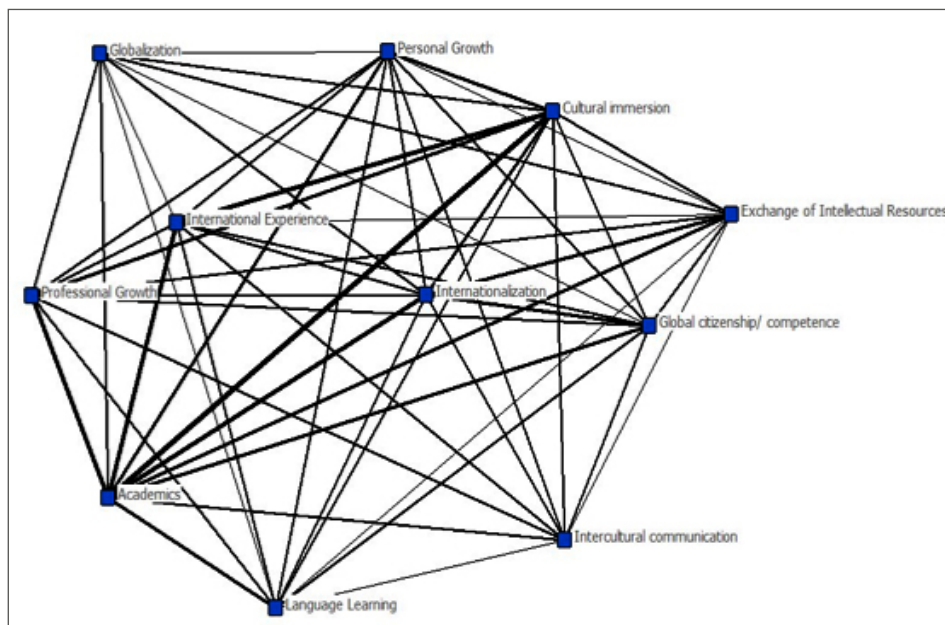

Figure 1: Network Map of Theme Referencing in Study Abroad Websites

themes. (It is important to note that centrality refers not to actual location in the map but rather to a theme's frequent referencing with other themes visible by tie thickness.) Next, internationalization plays a key connective role, having the strongest ties with the following nodes: academics, exchange of resources, global citizenship, and cultural immersion. Its ties with globalization, personal growth, professional growth, language learning, intercultural communication, and international experience are less thick but still strong. The theme of cultural immersion is also key, having strong ties with international experience, personal growth, professional growth, academics, and internationalization.

In addition to these themes that played a central role in being frequently mentioned with other themes, interesting patterns are visible in the networks that emerged among words frequently mentioned together. The most visibly strong network is that of *cultural immersion—academics—international experience*. Another similar network was *cultural immersion—internationalization—academics*. Both of these networks reflect the convergence of the phrasing of websites where study abroad was frequently depicted in light of internationalization or international experiences and, simultaneously, as providing both cultural immersion and academic benefits. Additionally, *internationalization—exchange of intellectual resources—academics* was another strong network, showing how websites who mention academics and internationalization together also frequently speak of the exchange of intellectual resources.

Most interesting is the theme of globalization whose ties with any other node individually or as part of a network are particularly weak. Despite being commonly referenced in study abroad literature as a catalyst for the internationalization of higher education (Griffiths & Arnove, 2015), it occupies a seemingly marginal position in this network map, and its strongest ties are with the themes of exchange of resources, cultural immersion, internationalization, professional growth, and academics, albeit overall rather weak. However, rather than suggest that globalization plays a non-central role, I argue that this shows that globalization has become both a taken-for-granted force and an imagined space within which

all of the networks shown operate. As Matus and Talburt (2015) explain, the idea of the imagined space of globalization allows both problems and solutions to be framed within it and, by so doing, legitimizes both the space itself and the role of the individuals and institutions that emerge to solve these problems.

The Construction of "Taken-For-Granteds" through a World Culture

Scholars offer various explanations for the creation of this imagined space of globalization within which forces such as internationalization both create and attempt to respond to new problems. As previously described, some (Griffiths & Arnove, 2015) see it through the lens of World Systems Analysis as a response to economic motives, a desire to maintain competitiveness within an increasingly global market and capitalist world-economy. However, as the global market is itself part of this space, the economic world systems explanation does not suffice independently, but when viewed together with the explanation provided by a world culture approach, it provides a clearer picture of the cultural, institutional, and economic forces that complement each other to perpetuate this respatialization. World Culture Theory views the international convergence in education as a product of the assimilation and recreation by educational systems of a universal model influenced by international and supranational organizations (Pizmony-Levy, 2016). Matus and Talburt (2015) explain that a network of intergovernmental and national documents is responsible for circulating a new conceptual model of the new imagined space of globalization. Then, the discourse of globalization within this network requires countries, individuals, and institutions to prepare for and respond to this phenomenon.

Intergovernmental and supranational organizations, including UNESCO, the OECD, and the European Union, played a key role in creating this model through "discursive interventions" (Matus & Talburt, 2015, p. 128). As both UNESCO and the OECD issued statements at the turn of the century on higher education and economic competition in a global world, they became key players in not only the creation but also the circulation

of such discourse. Interestingly, Matus and Talburt (2015) also found that UNESCO began promoting the same neoliberal economic ideals of the OECD, thereby narrowing and converging points of view regarding higher education and globalization and then perpetuating these views within the very global space it helped to create. Therefore, although the OECD promotes a globalized knowledge economy and human capital for development and growth while UNESCO focuses on cross-border exchange to promote economic partnerships and competition, both strengthen the legitimacy of internationalization within the space of globalization.

Once the space of globalization is created with universities at its center as agents to both create and respond to its problems, globalization is then recontextualized within national discourse to become the concern of a country, its institutions, and its students. The use of vague terms such as "innovation" and "global competitiveness" by the web's original actors allows for their recontextualization in whichever place they are enacted, inviting universal participation in the space of globalization to which they belong, contributing simultaneously to the changing nature of higher education to mirror market demands as previously mentioned. Their entrance into this space then further legitimizes the existence of this space, making it necessary for all universities—if they do not wish to lose their place in the world-economy—to operate within it. For example, in the United States, the Association of American Colleges and Universities responded to the OECD and UNESCO by enacting and circulating a set of guidelines for skills that twenty-first century university students should possess (Matus & Talburt, 2015), thereby locally contextualizing this world culture within national and local discourse, inviting universities to step into the space of globalization to offer solutions. The convergence of study abroad phrasing using vague terms such as "global competence" and "cultural immersion" to solve the problems of internationalization allow for study abroad to serve as one more path by which universities have entered this global space. It is not only study abroad programming but also the language used to describe it, influenced by a world culture created and circulated by supranational organizations and perpetuated

by the universities who take up this culture, that is destined to become increasingly isomorphic.

As described by Pizmony-Levy (2016) in the context of international large-scale assessments, the legitimacy of such a world culture is institutionalized not only by being embedded in a local context, but also through the portrayal of problems with the emergence of solutions and through the lack of questioning or critique of such a culture. Study abroad programs accept and partake in this world culture of the imagined space of globalization and the role of study abroad within it through the convergence of their phrasing (e.g., "cultural immersion" and the "academic benefits" of study abroad, among others). From this view, while this globalized space was created by supranational and international organizations, universities participate in it through study abroad by embedding study abroad in their own institutional contexts, by portraying these programs as a solution to problems, and by not questioning or critiquing the ideas of study abroad, internationalization, or globalization but rather accepting them as taken-for-granted.

As one example of these "taken-for-granteds," consider the way in which study abroad websites portray a set of skills to be gained, a list of motivations for studying abroad or partaking in exchange, while rarely referencing any literature on the subject. Certainly, the literature exists. Cushner and Mahon (2002) discuss the world-mindedness that students develop through leaving their comfort zone and being immersed in a new culture. Anderson et al. (2006) argue that students who spend an extended time abroad have greater cultural awareness. However, the field lacks consensus on these outcomes. For example, Salisbury, An, and Pascarella (2013) found that study abroad participation had little influence on students' appreciation of cultural difference, pointing to the fact that this commonly touted benefit is often exaggerated in higher education. Van de Berg et al.'s (2009) study found that exposure to a new culture did not lead to increased intercultural learning but for some even led to decreased cultural understanding. The existing academic research that does suggest a link between study abroad and intercultural competence is of-

ten wrought with methodological weakness such as an insufficient number of pre-test/post-test studies comparing pre-departure attitudes and behaviors to attitudes and behaviors when students return (Salisbury et al., 2013). Considering that cultural immersion and global competence are recurring themes in the phrasing of study abroad websites, this finding may be surprising, but Schartner (2016) offers the explanation that despite inconclusive evidence for such competence as a result of study abroad participation, it is increasingly referenced as an effect of and justification for the internationalization of higher education, which the universities relate to academic and employment prospects in light of globalization. It seems then that Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis of cultural immersion initiating a process of osmosis of these vaguely defined skills is used too liberally and problematically considering the absence of methodologically-sound support for such claims. Nonetheless, these claims are employed to promote and justify students' participation in the globalized space, which itself becomes a "taken-for-granted."

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Analysis

This paper is intended only to highlight the case of how study abroad programs are portrayed online by universities. Despite great variety in location, structure, funding, length, and a variety of other factors, the programs sound very similar in the way they are described by their websites. This isomorphism speaks to a trend that extends well beyond study abroad and into higher education in general, reflecting the perpetuation of a rapidly expanding world culture, which despite its seeming anonymity emerges from the influence of supranational and international organizations and then is given local meaning which legitimizes its existence. In presenting this analysis and the network map as a visual example, I aim to bring attention to how universities are partaking in this world culture and the imagined global space through study abroad programming. I recognize the limitations of such a preliminary overview and call for further studies to more deeply explore this topic.

One limitation occurred in the analysis, as in some instances, mul-

tiple pages on the same site were used to obtain the information that was then coded. For example, the home page for the office responsible for international education often contained introductory information and a description of the purpose or motivations for international study. Occasionally, this was not the case, and multiple pages such as one for general information on outbound mobility and then the next on "reasons for studying abroad" were both included to provide the necessary descriptions to allow coding. Furthermore, the function of outgoing student mobility was assigned to different offices depending on the university. European institutions tended to house this function under the international relations office, while universities in North America, Oceania, and South America typically had a website specifically for study abroad. Regardless of these inconsistencies, my analysis only addressed outbound student mobility, and despite the convergence of phrasing, there was a lack of uniformity in the organization of these websites, making it difficult to ensure that all information available was found and coded.

However, further analysis is necessary for a deeper understanding of how various factors may affect the phrasing used. For example, during my analysis I noted that European universities tend to focus very heavily on academic content and the process of initiating a semester or year abroad, usually detailing what is needed to participate in the Erasmus+ program. It would be interesting to conduct further analysis to determine how not only geographic region but also colonial history are related to phrasing and the portrayal of these programs. Additionally, given the small size of the sample of websites analyzed, more studies are needed to include a more representative sample of universities with study abroad programming to more thoroughly understand the convergence of their phrasing within the space of globalization, a capitalist world-economy, and an expanding world culture.

Conclusion
The aim of this study is not to refute any findings that suggest the innumerable benefits to study abroad but rather simply to highlight that

such conclusions have become taken-for-granted and serve to perpetuate the convergence of study abroad phrasing with little to no critique or questioning by the programs who employ them. Through a World Culture Theory approach, which draws on neo-institutionalist theory to explain how a self-perpetuating world culture is produced by and itself produces global convergence, nation-states enact rationalized myths of progress, taken-for-granted beliefs, and shared values (Takayama, 2015). It is important, however, to see that as the nation-state is no longer the sole provider of education, it is neither the only unit of structure in such a world polity of rationalized myths, and there is much more to explore regarding how sub-national actors, such as higher education institutions, exercise this convergence within the space of globalization and thus themselves become increasingly powerful at recreating and perpetuating this world culture. It is also limiting, as current academic discourse does, to portray World Culture Theory as incompatible with the World Systems Analysis view of economic motivation for convergence (Griffiths & Arnove, 2015). At least in the case of study abroad phrasing, visualized in this paper through the use of a network map, such convergence appears to reflect the motivation of participation in a capitalist world-economy and an imagined globalized space through the employment of certain rationalized myths and "taken-for-granteds" that are created and perpetuated by a world culture. So taken-for-granted are these beliefs, however, that the act of converging is rarely a conscious one. While it may appear to be an expression of local or unique interests and needs, it is instead the local legitimization (Pizmony-Levy, 2016) of globally institutionalized models and their supporting discourse (Frank, Robinson, & Olesen, 2011) at the site of the university. The convergence of study abroad phrasing is just one example of this isomorphism that occurs within a new, imagined space of globalization as the forces of internationalization, a world-economy, and a self-perpetuating world culture continue to grow.

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