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EDUCATION LIFE | STRATEGY

# Study Abroad's Seven Deadly Sins

By PETER A. COCLANIS APRIL 8, 2016

We've all heard about the purported benefits of study-abroad programs, the most fundamental of which is the opportunity for personal growth. Proponents are often vague about precisely what they mean in this regard, but growth is generally said to be signified by a broadening of perspective, greater adaptability and confidence, and enhanced empathy. Along with having the opportunity to develop international networks and improve language skills, study-abroad students are set on the path to becoming "global citizens." The full (international) monty!

In many, if not most cases, students do have positive experiences. That said, long involvement in international education in general and study abroad in particular has led me to the conclusion that other outcomes are also possible, particularly for students who go into a program without much forethought, focus or purpose. With the above considerations in mind, I have identified some of the threats that, in part by diverting students from pursuing more fruitful educational/travel experiences, can derail a study-abroad experience.

## **Slide Courses**

Without too much effort, students can locate courses with minimal requirements and irregular schedules, often taught by stringers and moonlighters. Because few American students have the language skills to "direct enroll" in regular classes in another country, partner institutions often maximize instruction in English to accommodate American schools. And so it is relatively easy to take all classes in English regardless of locale. But taking slide courses, especially in English,

considerably lessens the possibility that you will get much out of your academic experience.

From a purely academic standpoint, the quality of study abroad is likely to be less than that at home. Sure, there are excellent universities in other parts of the world that offer rich study-abroad opportunities. But proprietary programs, set up and staffed by American universities, and programs arranged by third-party providers, which bundle students from various universities in a foreign destination, are a mixed bag. It doesn't help that many students have quite a few other things on their minds than academics.

### **Suds**

The minimum drinking age in foreign countries is typically lower (in most of Europe 18, or 16 for beer and wine) or nonexistent (in parts of Africa and Asia), and many drinking establishments have yet to abandon happy hours (often lasting until 10 or 11 p.m.), ladies nights or "open pours" for a set price. So some students spend a good deal of time squandering what should be one of the highlights of their undergraduate careers. Try following a discussion on Dutch art in the golden age or on the origins of the euro in a 9 a.m. seminar with a half-dozen hung-over 19-year-olds. (Classes, especially in proprietary programs, are largely held in the mornings to allow for afternoon tours and museum visits, and on Monday through Thursday so that three-day weekends can be used for travel.)

### **Sexual Fervidity**

From the point of view of some students, no study-abroad program would be complete without an "experiential education" component involving sex with a local, despite the chill effect of Amanda Knox's misadventures in Perugia, Italy. Students in such relationships spend much of their nonscheduled hours otherwise engaged, with intermittent treks to the door to pick up pizzas from Domino's, which now has locations in more than 75 countries. Follow Plautus's famous injunction: *modus omnibus in rebus*.

### **Shopping**

When not drinking or looking for sex, some students spend inordinate amounts of time engaged in this “sin”— and the cheaper and tackier the junk bought, the better. One student in a program I led spent almost all her nonscheduled hours pounding the pavement of Southeast Asia haggling over \$2 T-shirts and trinkets. The opportunity costs were high, both in the form of museums and performances missed and deeper, richer relationships foregone. She told me she felt a lot of pressure to return with gifts for family, neighbors and sorority sisters. By no means was she superficial (she is now a doctor). She just never thought much about what she wanted out of studying abroad.

### **Self-Segregation**

This generally occurs in stand-alone proprietary programs open to students from one institution and led by a professor from that school. If designed well — inviting students in the host country to enroll in classes, scheduling home stays — such programs minimize self-segregation. But too often programs consist of 15 to 20 students, subdivided into three or four subgroups of friends, living and learning in splendid isolation behind a kind of *de facto* *cordon sanitaire*. When such students do venture beyond the line, they often do so with other study-abroad students in similar programs from similar schools, further insulating themselves from interaction with local residents.

### **Smartphoning**

If I ruled the world, no student abroad would be allowed a smartphone. When students have smartphones with robust calling plans, they might as well stay at State U. Some observers have referred to this as the FOMO syndrome: Fear of missing out on activities back home tethers them to texting with people thousands of miles away rather than engaging with those on the scene. As world ruler I would, for safety's sake, concede the need for one smartphone, to remain in the possession of the program director. I'd also require students on the flight over to read Sherry Turkle's new book, “Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age.”

### **Selfie-Taking**

Fingers in noses, tongues out, pants down, you name it — inappropriate selfies are taken at venues ranging from ancient ruins to modern-day holy places. While on a visit with a study-abroad group to the International Islamic University in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, I had to stop a student from taking a selfie in front of the administration building while wearing an Israeli army beret he had in his backpack. Fun stuff like that.

Mature students with purpose and dedication will generally achieve the kind of personal growth so often heralded by study-abroad boosters. Immature students will not, for these programs do not so much build character as reveal it. A foreign country isn't the place for a childish 20-year-old to grow up, especially when representing an American university. Students and parents, take heed.

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