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2 Stop Commercializing the Value of Studying Abroad: The Lack of an Effect of Study Abroad on Early Career Income of U.S. Graduates

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Abstract

Study abroad is often described as an educational experience that makes students more competitive on the job market, ultimately leading to a higher job income. Is this the right way of arguing for the value of study abroad? Using U.S. representative data on college graduates, I examined the extent to which study abroad actually affects students' income. Results of a propensity score analysis showed that, contrary to what is often assumed, study abroad does not result in a higher job income, four years after graduation. This raises the question of whether study abroad benefits students' careers in the ways currently assumed. Moreover, it emphasizes the need to gain a more nuanced and holistic understanding of the impact of study abroad on careers.

Keywords: career outcomes, job income, propensity score analysis, study abroad

Introduction

Study abroad is often promoted as an educational experience that provides students with a competitive advantage on the job market, ultimately leading to a higher job income. However, we can wonder if using income as the ultimate outcome is the correct way of arguing for the benefits of an international experience. Researchers, as well as practitioners, have repeatedly pointed out that there is limited empirical evidence on the employment benefits and outcomes of student mobility experiences (Van Mol, 2017; Waibel, Rüger, Ette, and Sauer, 2017). Simply sending students to a location abroad for academic study is not sufficient for reaching the learning goals higher education institutions often envisioned (Pedersen, 2010; Salisbury, An, and Pascarella, 2013). Especially considering the way study abroad programs are currently structured and implemented, desirable career outcomes associated with study abroad are neither automatic nor guaranteed (Bolen, 2001). Studies that found an effect of study abroad on job income mostly measured either students' perceptions of how study abroad affected their careers (Franklin, 2010;

Potts, 2015) or employers' perceptions of whether international experience plays a role in hiring graduates (Molony, Sowter, and Potts, 2011). In short, an effect of study abroad on students' actual job income has not been shown and cannot be assumed.

Universities have increasingly become a space of education-commodification and student consumerism (Armstrong and Hamilton, 2013; Bolen, 2001). Also in the field of internationalization, this has led to a discourse around study abroad highlighting the monetary value of the international experience. A false assumption of such an effect can be misleading, especially for students from less privileged backgrounds. For many of these students, the financial investment required to study abroad adds significantly to their college debt. Such a decision cannot just be based on beliefs that such an experience will 'pay itself back'.

The purpose of this study is to examine to what extent study abroad participation of U.S. students affects career income, four years after graduation. This study will thereby help clarify whether study abroad is the career-boosting experience that it is often argued to be.

Literature Review

In this review of existing literature, I take a closer look at the relationship between study abroad and job income. Research so far indicates the importance of correcting for the disparities in study abroad opportunities. I will argue why the research design of this study using propensity score weighting, addresses some of the key issues in previous research.

Study Abroad and Career Success

Currently, the effect of study abroad on career success is argued for in two ways. First, in an indirect way by measuring direct learning outcomes that, in turn, would enhance students' careers later on. The direct learning outcomes of study abroad are reported to be intercultural competencies, curiosity, flexibility, adaptability, course or major-related knowledge (Farrugia and Sanger, 2017), enhanced feelings of independence (Cisneros-Donahue, Krentler, Reinig, and Sabol, 2012) and language skills (Holmes and O'Neill, 2012; Pedersen, 2010). These learning outcomes of study abroad would prepare students for their future careers, potentially leading to higher income.

A second way in which the effect of study abroad on income is argued for is through self-reports by students and employers. Students who studied abroad reported that the abroad experience helped them in gaining skills useful in their jobs (Franklin, 2010; Potts, 2015). Specifically, students reported benefitting from their international

experiences by having gained communication, teamwork, problem-solving and self-management skills (Potts, 2015). In line with students' beliefs, employers also reported to recognize the importance of cross-cultural understanding in an increasingly global economic environment (Molony, Sowter, and Potts, 2011).

Both the studies indicating an indirect effect and the studies on perceived effects provide only suggestive evidence of a possible impact of the study abroad experience on careers. More research is needed to truly test the effect of study abroad on career income.

A recent study on Dutch students did find a positive effect of study mobility during the Bachelor on graduates' monthly wage (Van Mol, Caarls and Souto-Otero, 2021). However, after controlling for selection into study abroad, this effect disappeared. This shows that the effect of study abroad on wage cannot be causally attributed to the abroad experience. The reason why students who went abroad had a higher wage was explained by pre-existing differences between mobile and non-mobile students.

Such confounding effect is especially important to take into account in the U.S., where the lack of a federal funding system to fund study abroad hands much of the responsibility to the student. While in the E.U. financial support is provided to all students who go abroad (Gresham and Clayton, 2011; Petzold and Peter, 2015), students in the U.S. are responsible for their own funding, making their opportunities much more dependent on their financial background. Because financial background is also know to impact students' career prospects (Ng, Eby, Sorensen, and Feldman, 2005), it is crucial to take the disparities in study abroad opportunities into consideration when testing the effect of study abroad on job income.

Disparities in Study Abroad Opportunities in the U.S.

Over the two decades, scholars and the U.S. federal government have become increasingly aware of the large disparities in opportunities to study abroad for students of underrepresented backgrounds (U.S. Department of Education, 2012; Wiers-Jenssen, 2011). To study abroad is currently mostly available to students from well-off backgrounds (Messelink, Van Maele, and Spencer-Oatey, 2015; Take and Shoraku, 2018). Students with higher financial need are less likely to participate in study abroad (Whatley, 2017). Moreover, social, and cultural factors play a role in students' decisions to study abroad.

First-generation students from households where neither parent completed a bachelor's degree, do not benefit from an environment that is familiar with study abroad (Lörz, Netz, and Quast, 2016). Students of color are also known to experience obstacles to engaging in study abroad

(Brux and Fry, 2010). Students of underrepresented racial minorities and immigrant students often deal with a transition into college that is culturally very different from their home communities (Nuñez, 2009; Rodriguez and Cruz, 2009). Also for rural and transfer students, study abroad means an additional transition process (Byun, Meece, and Irvin, 2012; McClure, Szelenyi, Niehaus, Anderson, and Reed, 2010). Students who are struggling academically and transfer students may be less likely to study abroad as they have to focus on their required academic program to complete their degree (Quaye and Harper, 2014). Furthermore, students with disabilities are underrepresented in study abroad (Johnstone and Edwards, 2019).

Students' demographics and college experiences predicting study abroad participation are also found to be predictors of measures of career success such as income (Ng, Eby, Sorensen, and Feldman, 2005). Therefore, the fact that study abroad is only available to a select group of students and less accessible to students of socially and financially disadvantaged backgrounds creates a challenge for empirical research and needs to be addressed in the research design. To get a better sense of the unique effect of study abroad on career outcomes, there is a need for more advanced methodological approaches to better account for confounding factors (Waibel, Rüger, Ette, and Sauer, 2017).

Research Method

Research on the effect of study abroad on income that takes into account the disparities in study abroad opportunities has been lacking in the U.S. context. In this study, I used U.S. nationally representative data that allowed me to adjust for the inequalities in study abroad opportunities by using propensity score analysis along with regression analyses, allowing for a better estimate of the unique effect of study abroad on job income.

Data Source

I used data from the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (BandB:08/12). The BandB:08/12, is a dataset collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), examining students' education and work experiences after they completed their bachelor's degree. The BandB:08/12 sample includes 17,170 students who completed requirements for a bachelor's degree in the academic year 2007-08 at a postsecondary institution in the United States. This sample was followed up four years after graduation in 2012 (Cominole, Shepherd, Siegel, and Socha, 2015).

Weights, sample, and missing data. All analyses were weighted according to NCES standards, accounting for oversampling and nonresponse (Heeringa, West, and Berglund, 2017). Because I use job income as an outcome variable, graduates' who were not employed or who did not work for pay at the time of the follow-up in 2012 were excluded from the sample. Taking the weights and sample specifications into consideration, the analytic sample consisted of 8,380 college graduates. The percentage of missing values on the variables were all under 1.8%, resulting in an overall rate of missingness of 3.9%.

Variables

Dependent and independent variables. Job income indicated the graduates' self-reported annualized salary from their current or most recent primary job as of the 2012 interview. The independent variable, participation in study abroad, was measured in the final year of students' undergraduate degree (2007-08), through a question asking whether students ever studied abroad as of their last year in college. Only students who studied abroad for more than a month were considered as having participated in study abroad.

Covariates. The covariates chosen were expected to impact the outcome, income, or the treatment, study abroad. These covariates describe students' demographics, high school experiences, and college characteristics. Post-treatment variables included students' post-college educational and job experiences.

Data Analyses

Data analysis consisted of three steps.

Descriptive analysis and mean comparisons. Descriptive analyses provide a description of the analytic sample and the two subsamples of students, those who studied abroad and those who did not. Mean comparison tests provided a first glance at the extent to which there were differences between the students who studied abroad and those who did not.

Calculating propensity scores. Inverse Propensity Weights (IPW) were calculated by taking the average treatment effect of the treated (Austin, 2011). Overall, the propensity scores largely corrected for the selection bias that would make some students more likely to have studied abroad, potentially explaining the effect of study abroad on job income.

Analyses of weighted data. Covariates used in calculating the propensity scores were also included in the regression analysis. This doubly robust method of correcting for confounding factors ensured that in

case the propensity score model was incorrectly specified, the regression model still would correct for the pre-treatment variables (Ho, Imai, King, and Stuart, 2007). Additionally, post-college job and educational characteristics were included in the regression model to correct for possible post-college confounding explanations of the effect of study abroad on job income, represented in the following equation:

$$y = \beta 0 + \beta 1^{*} \text{ Study Abroad} + \beta 2^{*} \text{ Demographics} + \beta 3^{*} \text{ High School Experiences} + \beta 4^{*} \text{ College Characteristics} + \beta 5^{*} \text{ Post-College Educational and Career Characteristics} + \text{Error}$$

By using propensity score analysis, this study corrected for the fact that not all students have the opportunity to go abroad, providing a better sense of the effect of study abroad on job income. While this study cannot claim causality, using propensity score analysis does improve the estimates of this effect compared to past studies on this topic and thereby gets us one step closer to elucidating the extent to which study abroad affects job income.

Results

The results allowed a better understanding of whether study abroad affects early career income, correcting for respondents' demographics, high school and college experiences and post-college job and educational characteristics.

Descriptive Results and Mean Comparisons

The descriptive results and mean comparisons are provided in Table 1 and show that students who studied abroad on average earned $1,069/year more, four years after college completion, than students who did not study abroad. However, the difference in the average annual income was not significant. This finding contradicts with expectations in research on study abroad and its beneficial outcomes on students' learning and careers.

The absence of a significant difference in income is already unexpected and is even more remarkable considering the descriptive characteristics of the students who studied abroad. Students who went abroad were less often part of an underrepresented group in higher education. Students who went abroad were less often of color (14%) compared to students who did not study abroad (24%). They were also more often first-generation (25% versus 42%), and of a low-income background (15% versus 25%). Results also showed that students from rural backgrounds went abroad less often than students from urban or suburban areas. Moreover, students who went abroad were less often from rural backgrounds (20%) compared to the students who did not go abroad

(29%). Students who studied abroad generally also performed better in high school compared to their peers who did not go abroad.

In short, students who went abroad were more often white, traditional, high-achieving students, often coming from privileged backgrounds and generally seemed to be students who are expected to have a higher annual income. This makes the absence of a significant difference in post-college annual income between the students who studied abroad and who did not, even more intriguing.

Regression Results

Regression results are presented in Table 2 and show that, also when correcting for students' demographics, high school and college experiences and post-bachelor characteristics, study abroad was not a significant predictor of income. Students who studied abroad had, on average, a higher income of $1,085. However, this difference is relatively small and not statistically significant. Non-significant findings support the results from the descriptive statistics and mean comparisons, showing no effect of study abroad on income.

The regression results also indicate what variables are predictive of annual income. When looking at annual income overall, pre-college predictors include students' gender, disability status, and math level in high school and institutional selectivity. All post-bachelor job characteristics were significant predictors of income. Students who gained a post bachelor's degree earned $4,082/year less than students who did not attain a post bachelor's degree. Also, students who were enrolled while employed had a significantly lower income of $8,613/year less than people who were not enrolled while employed. Students earned $10,193/year more if their job required a bachelor's degree, $6,559/year more if their job was in a STEM field, and $22,259/year more if they were full-time employed.

Some of the variables on which students who went abroad differed significantly from those who did not (Table 1) were also significant predictors of income (Table 2). A couple of variables indicate ways in which students who went abroad may have been more subtly advantaged in their careers. Students who went abroad more often held a job requiring a bachelor's degree, which, on average, resulted in a $10,193 higher annual income. At the same time, students who went abroad also were described by characteristics that were related to a lower annual income. Students who went abroad were more often female and had, on average, a $10,172/year lower annual income. Students who went abroad enrolled more often in an additional degree, which generally led to an average of $4,082/year lower income compared to those who were not enrolled. While the regression analysis accounted for these factors, it

Table 1 Means, standard errors and mean comparisons for all variables.

	All Students N=8,050		*Students who studied abroad N=1,010*		*Students who did not study abroad N=7,040*		*Diff.*
Variable	Mean	SE	Mean	SE	Mean	SE	
Studied abroad	0.13	0.01	--	--	--	--	
Dependent Variable							
Annual income	45,546.95	(561.51)	46,481.77	(1,418.71)	45,412.42	(575.54)	1069.35
Demographics							
Female	0.57	(0.01)	0.69	(0.02)	0.55	(0.01)	0.14**
Age	1.39	(0.01)	1.19	(0.02)	1.42	(0.01)	-0.23**
Of color	0.23	(0.01)	0.14	(0.02)	0.24	(0.01)	-0.10**
First generation	0.40	(0.01)	0.25	(0.02)	0.42	(0.01)	-0.17**
Low-income	0.23	(0.01)	0.15	(0.02)	0.25	(0.01)	-0.10**
Immigrant	0.19	(0.01)	0.17	(0.02)	0.20	(0.01)	-0.03
Rural	0.28	(0.01)	0.20	(0.02)	0.29	(0.01)	-0.09**
With a disability	0.07	(0.00)	0.09	(0.01)	0.07	(0.00)	0.02
High school experiences							
Completed honors	0.57	(0.01)	0.64	(0.02)	0.56	(0.01)	0.08*
Took advanced math	0.42	(0.01)	0.54	(0.03)	0.40	(0.01)	0.14**
Learned foreign language	0.26	(0.01)	0.33	(0.02)	0.25	(0.01)	0.08*
Average GPA	6.29	(0.02)	6.57	(0.04)	6.25	(0.02)	0.32**
College experiences							
Transfer	0.17	(0.01)	0.07	(0.01)	0.18	(0.01)	-0.11**
Public institution	0.67	(0.01)	0.53	(0.03)	0.69	(0.01)	-0.16**
Selective institution	0.32	(0.02)	0.50	(0.04)	0.29	(0.02)	0.21**
Non-traditional	0.46	(0.01)	0.31	(0.03)	0.48	(0.01)	-0.17**
Far from high school	0.45	(0.01)	0.53	(0.02)	0.44	(0.01)	0.09**
Post-college Characteristics							
Post-bachelor's degree	0.19	(0.01)	0.25	(0.02)	0.19	(0.01)	0.06*
Enrolled while employed	0.13	(0.01)	0.15	(0.02)	0.13	(0.01)	0.02
Bachelor's required	0.69	(0.01)	0.75	(0.02)	0.68	(0.01)	0.07**
In a STEM field	0.14	(0.01)	0.12	(0.02)	0.14	(0.01)	-0.02
Full-time employed	0.83	(0.01)	0.81	(0.02)	0.83	(0.01)	-0.02

Note: All reported sample sizes are rounded to the nearest 10 in accordance with NCES restricted data license.
Significant differences between students who did and did not go abroad indicated ** p<0.001, * p<0.01, + p<0.05 as determined using two-tailed tests.
Source: Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B:08/12), 2008-2012, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

Table 2 Annual job income, four years after bachelor graduation - linear regression.

Variables	*β*	*SD*
Studied Abroad	1,085.3	(1,263.6)
Demographics		
Female	-10,171.8**	(1,614.2)
Age <25 reference group		
25-28	-726.9	(1,790.1)
>28	-527.7	(4,044.5)
Of color	-471.4	(1,944.0)
First Generation	-81.5	(1,454.2)
Low-income	-1,427.6	(1,735.5)
Immigrant	-909.8	(1,954.1)
Rural	-611.8	(1,285.8)
With a disability	-6,763.6*	(2,390.3)
High school experiences		
Completed honors subject	-1,051.1	(1,630.3)
Took advanced math	3,758.1*	(1,318.9)
Learned foreign language	-525.3	(1,434.7)
Average high school GPA	1,597.5	(1,094.5)
College experiences		
Transfer	3,706.0	(2,395.4)
Non-traditional	673.1	(1,703.3)
Living far from high school	584.9	(1,321.5)
Public institution	-1,015.8	(1,303.6)
Selective institution	3,339.5+	(1,451.6)
Post-college characteristics		
Attained post-bachelor's degree	-4,082.4*	(1,487.4)
Enrolled while employed	-8,613.1**	(1,999.1)
Bachelor's degree required	10,193.1**	(1,383.7)
In a STEM field	6,559.0**	(1,791.6)
Full-time employed	22,258.5**	(1,513.4)
Observations	8,050	
R-Squared	0.248	

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. All reported sample sizes are rounded to the nearest 10 in accordance with NCES restricted data license. **p<0.001; *p<0.01; +p<0.05
Source: Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B:08/12), 2008-2012, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

shows that these are factors that impact both students' likelihood of studying abroad and their income.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results of this study show that, contrary to what is often presumed, study abroad does not seem to increase U.S. students' income, four years after graduating from their undergraduate degree. The persistent narrative talking about study abroad in the context of economic outcomes emphasizes the need for a more nuanced and holistic understanding of the value of study abroad for students' careers.

Why Would Study Abroad not Lead to a Higher Job Income?

While students who studied abroad did not experience a higher income in the first four years after they graduated, results show that these students enrolled in additional degrees more often. This could explain to some extent why students who went abroad did not have a higher average income. Some of the students who enrolled in additional degrees may be still in school by the time of the follow-up and therefore likely earn less than their peers who are not enrolled while employed. Future research should examine the effect of study abroad by investigating career outcomes measured later on in peoples' work life. Not only have most of these former students completed their additional degrees, but they will also have had more time to benefit from the skills they learned abroad.

The Need for a More Nuanced and Holistic Understanding

The fact that, despite the general presumption, no effect was found of study abroad on early career income shows that using income as outcome to argue for international experiences may be misleading. This does not mean that we should stop arguing for the value of studying abroad but that we need to move away from the commercialized way in which study abroad is sometimes presented to students. Instead, we need a more nuanced understanding of how study abroad generally impacts career perspectives.

Previous research suggested that students who studied abroad gravitate more often toward work with an intercultural dimension or global focus (Franklin, 2010; Mohajeri Norris and Gillespie, 2009). As such work may be less financially rewarding, this may help explain the absence of an effect of study abroad on income. With research examining the effect of study abroad in different types of careers and fields,

a better insight can be gained in what fields study abroad is particularly impactful.

More insight should be gained also in what specific international experiences impact careers and how this depending on where students go, the support they receive, and the level of cultural difference between the home and host country. For many countries, U.S. students do not need to learn a second language, explaining benefits of the abroad experience around language skills and resiliency may not be as prevalent as for European students for example. A better understanding of in which cases study abroad is likely to impact students' careers allows for a more targeted and efficient way of spending resources available to support students. Moreover, future research should look deeper into the experiences of students from disadvantaged backgrounds to investigate in what ways the international experiences are specifically meaningful to them.

This study shows that the increasing emphasis on the value of study abroad in terms of socioeconomic outcomes like income is not representing how study abroad can be most meaningful to students' learning. Future research and data collection efforts by national institutes should try to gain a more comprehensive understanding of career outcomes. In this way, research can gain a better insight into the impact of study abroad on creating not just more productive but also more globally competent employees.

Implications

This study showed that the economic argument used to attract students into study abroad programs does not always apply. This does not mean the study abroad experience is irrelevant to students' careers. However, it does raise the question if a higher paycheck is the best way to convince students to embark on an adventure in a foreign country. Outcomes used to promote study abroad should better represent the goal of study abroad which is not only to support students in becoming more competent employees but to respond to global crisis (Reilly and Senders, 2009).

Higher education institutions should be challenged to think more critically how to effectively provide an educational context that produces long-lasting effects on students' careers and how they can support students in translating the intercultural skills they acquired abroad to their lives back home (Messelink, Van Maele, and Spencer-Oatey, 2015). By incorporating the international experiences into students' academic programs, the abroad experiences can be linked to students' academic and professional development (Doyle, Gendall, Meyer, Hoek, Tait, McKenzie, and Loorparg, 2010). This can also then benefit student who do not have the opportunity to study abroad (Beelen and Jones, 2015; Watkins and

Smith, 2018). A strengthened educational context can thereby encourage all students to think more purposefully about how the international experiences impacts their future careers and informs their pursuits of solving the global challenges that are ahead of us.

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