

New Destinations in Study Abroad: Examining US University Expansion Efforts in Cuba

Taylor Woodman^{a,*}

^a*University of Maryland, United States*

*Corresponding author: Email: tcwood@umd.edu
Address: University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, United States

Introduction

Study abroad has become increasingly popular at US high education institutions, commonly serving as a vehicle for enhancing the university's internationalization efforts. In 2005, 27 percent of US higher education institutions did not send any students abroad, and yet, by the end of the decade study abroad programming expanded to almost all institutions (Stearns 2009). Since then, study abroad has only continued to grow, as the Institute for International Education (2017) reported 325,339 US students studied abroad for academic credit in 2016-2017, an increase of 3.8 percent over the previous year and an increase of over 100,000 student participants since 2005-2006 (Institute for International Education 2007). As study abroad becomes central in the university environment, research studies provide evidence of its importance and relevance to the American college experience.

Notably, as study abroad participation continues to grow, programming moves away from traditional locations (e.g. Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand) to build the programming infrastructure with study abroad in less traditional locations (e.g. Caribbean, sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia). However, there is a lack of empirical evidence identifying the motivations for these exchanges. Michael Woolf (2006) critiqued the expansion of study abroad programs by examining a decrease in area and regional studies courses and the reduction of language courses on the university campus, thus calling into question the motivation of developing programs in these areas. Increasing the sites of students but reducing curricular connections to the host community further supports the

colonial critiques of scholars. Anthony Ogden (2008) furthers this critique, by providing insight into concerns regarding programming elements in these nontraditional areas that he likens to a colonial settler's veranda. Students in this colonial-like setting are provided resources (e.g. luxury housing, 24/7 internet access, etc.) beyond the standard of living of the local population. They enjoy the comforts of their study abroad programming while only passively engaging with the local population and, thus, viewing the community from afar (Ogden 2008). Subsequently, the failure to create programming in solidarity with the local community creates tensions between study abroad programs and their hosts.

Research Study Context

In this study, the researcher aims to address the expansion of study abroad programming specifically to the nontraditional location of Cuba. Cuba is of particular importance as it has long been a challenging and complex research location for American scholars and the context of academic exchange in Cuba is rapidly changing. In the academic year 2015/16, US students studying abroad in Cuba reached over 3,700. However, even with this increasing activity, there is still suspicion of and contention around studying in Cuba. Some study abroad programming leaders believe that spies loom within their programs and that Cuban informants or counterparts only provide top-down party lines (Kolivras and Scarpaci 2009). Others deem the US and Cuban academic environment too sensitive of a political landscape to transverse, making many scholars hesitant to engage (Clarke 2007; Bell 2013).

With the recent increase in US academic travel to Cuba after nearly a decade of decline, much of the institutional memory for setting up reciprocal exchange has been lost (Reinosa 2011). An increasingly market-driven approach seems to have emerged, at least for many, if not all, of the US institutions. For example, US educational advocacy organizations are charging Americans for exclusive access to meet with Cuban government officials (Institute for International Education, 2017b) and to advocate for all forms of travel to Cuba (NAFSA 2017). Others see this as a market opportunity and are eager to sign inter-institutional memorandums of understanding, as study abroad third-party provider organizations hurry to establish their program sites (Solloway 2016). The motivations behind the increase in academic exchanges and the extent to which neoliberal ideology, or resistance, are impacting these activities is still under researched.

To understand the influence of neoliberal policies in developing a market-driven approach to the university internationalization strategy, I use Slaughter and Rhoades' academic capitalism theory. They define academic capitalism as a phenomenon where US higher education institutions are forced to turn their efforts to entrepreneurship by selling research and other goods and leveraging resources from students (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). This research study is thus grounded upon academic capitalism theory, establishing that this environment exists and is pervasive across US institutions. The research aims to use academic capitalism theory to address the current literature providing an empirical understanding of US - Cuban academic exchange at a critical time in US - Cuban relations by answering two central research questions:

- Why are US and Cuban faculty and university administrators currently motivated to develop study abroad programming between the US and Cuban universities?
- How does the expansion of study abroad programming between the US and Cuba influence higher education policies and practices?

Methods

In this study, qualitative case study methods were used to critically examine study abroad programming between the United States and Cuba before, during and after the Obama Administration's announcement changing diplomatic relations between the US and Cuba on December 17, 2014. Case study research is distinct in that it focuses the study within the bounds of an event, time or topic (Stake 1978). The boundaries of my case are not limited to a single study abroad program but instead take a broad approach in defining my case as the topic of study abroad programming between the US and Cuba. In examining this phenomenon, I bound the study to university and program provider faculty and educational administrators who have primary oversight of facilitating these exchanges. Of particular interest are the faculty and educational administrators that engage in semester length study abroad programming both prior to, during, and following December 17, 2014. The perspectives of 12 of the main actors in the field, including educational administrators and faculty from US universities, Cuban universities, and study abroad program providers, were captured through in-depth interviews in Havana and Washington, DC to provide a more comprehensive view of study abroad implementation in Cuba. In addition to these interviews, documents supporting these exchanges (brochures, course syllabi, MOUs, etc.) were collected.

Implications for the Field

Internationalization and study abroad programming will remain a central focus for the future of many institutions. It is the hope that this research will provide a reflection of current study abroad practices from both the US and the host (i.e. Cuban) perspective in an effort to better understand the motives and purposes of these exchanges to aid in reciprocity efforts of these programs. Additionally, this study aims to further previous empirical studies by conducting an examination of the role of study abroad programming in transmitting or diffusing ideas (i.e. market-driven approach) that impact university policy and practice.

Lastly, comparative studies like this provide alternatives to dominant assumptions in US higher education policy and open a deeper scholarly debate on the future on global higher education systems.

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