

DIGGING INTO THE DATA

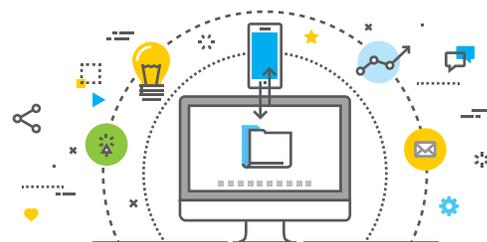


STUDY ABROAD OFFICES CAN TAKE ADVANTAGE OF A WEALTH OF INFORMATION IN THEIR SOFTWARE SYSTEM TO ENHANCE PROGRAMMING.

When Anthony Ogden was the Executive Director of Education Abroad & Exchanges at the University of Kentucky, the school's associate provost posed a challenging question: Can you run a meta-analysis of education abroad as a high-impact causal experience as it relates to retention and four-year graduation rates?

"I was shocked she was asking me to do such a sophisticated level of research, and she thought I could do it almost overnight," says Ogden, who recently joined Michigan State University as the Executive Director of Education Abroad & Exchanges. "But it's these kinds of requests that education abroad offices are getting more and more from senior administrators on campus."

In his 2015 publication for the Association of International Education Administrators (AIEA), "Toward a Research Agenda for U.S. Education Abroad," Ogden notes that "higher education in the United States is increasingly being asked to justify its value and to demonstrate that students are learning essential knowledge and skills." Universities expect complex analyses of all their programs, from academic majors to on-campus student activities.



TERRADOTTA

“Higher education has started relying on different types of large data sets, so it doesn’t surprise me that more senior leaders are asking for data on education abroad,” says Ogden. “They’re not just looking at the total number of students studying abroad and where they are studying. They’re also looking at exactly how education abroad is supporting other institutional objectives, such as retention, persistence to graduation, alumni loyalty, etc.”

With robust software systems for managing education abroad, gathering the right data—and using it to make sound decisions about programming—is possible. And it’s expected, not just at large public universities like Michigan State, but also mid-size and small private schools, such as Elon University in North Carolina.



PUTTING DATA TO WORK

Elon University, which has nearly 6,000 undergraduate students, strives for “100 percent access to global engagement,” says Amanda Zamzes, Business and Data Manager for the Global Education Center. The school tracks student participation in global engagement programs, which it divides into two general categories—study abroad programs or its Study USA program. (The latter includes domestic programs that introduce students to the richly diverse cultures, traditions and experiences in the U.S.)

“We cull the data and see how many students in each graduating class have participated in at least one program,” says Zamzes. “Then we look at the students’ majors and check how many did and did not study abroad. If it’s disproportionate, we try to figure out why.” For example, if a major has 20 graduating students and four opted not to study abroad, that’s not a big deal. But if 16 didn’t participate in a global engagement program, then Zamzes and her colleagues strive to figure out why.

They survey students who don’t participate, examine offerings and consider why study abroad may be difficult for a specific major. “If there aren’t a sufficient amount of programs that meet the requirements for a certain major, then we’ll go to the department, identify an ally and have conversations with them about what their students really need and what we offer,” says Zamzes.

For instance, the number of music students at Elon who enrolled in a study abroad program or Study USA was low. Only half of the music technology majors and 64 percent of the music education majors participated. That’s well below Elon’s average of 75 percent participation. So the university created its Jazz Ambassador’s Program, which will be offered for the first time this summer. Music students will spend three weeks in Italy, performing throughout the country and taking a class taught by an Elon professor. “It’s a wonderful program because it’s short, relatively cost-effective and allows students to put on their resume that they’ve performed internationally,” says Zamzes.



TIPS FOR CRUNCHING THE NUMBERS



Mining data within your software system and utilizing it to enhance study abroad programming is much more logical than trusting your gut instinct to make decisions. “Too many education abroad professionals rely on anecdotal evidence,” says Ogden. As an example, he cites the familiar refrain that home stays are the best option for education abroad. But Ogden adds there’s no compelling evidence to confirm that home stay experiences do in fact lead to better language acquisition, learning outcomes or cultural competency, for example.

“If we’re going to be considered educators in a higher education context and expand our role from a predominantly practitioner-oriented one, then we have to rely more heavily on evidence,” he says. Ogden and Zamzes offer this advice for study abroad offices that want to make the most of their enrollment and programming data:

- **Start small on your data utilization** journey. “Education abroad offices aren’t alone; every other segment of higher education is asked to provide reliable data,” says Ogden. “But not everyone can do sophisticated causal analyses and meta-analyses. Start with enrollment data so you at least understand your own population relative to institutional, regional and national trends.”
- **Decide what it is** you’re trying to quantify. “Figure out the story you want to tell to campus administrators about the importance of study abroad, then determine what data you need to tell that story,” says Zamzes. “We can spout the benefits of study abroad, but if there’s no data to prove it then someone may push back.”
- **Look beyond basic demographics** to project enrollment trends. In addition to examining data on

gender, race and ethnicity, also look at data on first-generation students, military veterans, honors students and other underrepresented populations.

- **Gather information from others** on campus. You may not have all the data you need in your study abroad enrollment management software. Or, you may be the lone employee in your office. Build relationships across campus with people in the bursar’s office, financial planning, the registrar’s office and so on. They can help you compile and analyze data.
- **Share and compare your data** with other universities. While at the University of Kentucky, Ogden provided yearly education enrollment reports to all 16 colleges, ranging from the College of Fine Arts to the College of Pharmacy. He also incorporated data from other benchmark institutions. “Frankly, the College of Engineering doesn’t care what the College of Nursing is doing,” he says. “But they do care what other Colleges of Engineering are doing—their targets for enrollment, the types of programs they offer, etc. If that data is available, we can better develop our strategic plans.” Currently, colleagues in the study abroad field rely primarily on data from the Institute of International Education Open Doors reports. But they should also make their own institutional education abroad enrollment reports available for benchmarking purposes.

- **Enlist the help of students.** If you don't have the skill set to crunch numbers, then Ogden suggests working with undergraduate or graduate students to help with enrollment management.
- **Use data to tackle conundrums.** Sixty percent of the Elon students who participate in global engagement programs are females, which tracks close to national data. According to a recent Open Doors report, the percentage of women and men studying abroad has held steady at a 65/35 split for more than

a decade. But Elon isn't content with the lopsidedness. "We're using data to try to figure out what those motivations are for men to study abroad," says Zamzes. She admits they haven't cracked the nut yet. But when and if they do, Elon will share its findings.

- **Take time to clean up your data.** "Data is only as good as what's entered into your system," says Zamzes. "If it's not good data when it goes in, it won't be good data when it comes out. So spend some time cleaning it up."

"Too many education abroad professionals rely on anecdotal evidence," *says Ogden.*

Ogden leaves education abroad offices with one cautionary comment. If they don't mine and leverage their data, then the offices are likely to become mere travel processing centers rather than expert resources on international education. "I can't imagine that 20 years down the road I'll just be handling travel logistics and compliance issues," he says. "I want to be viewed as a true international educator. Without a reliance on evidence and openness toward understanding data, we're not going to get there."



TERRADOTTA

ABOUT TERRA DOTTA

Our mission at Terra Dotta is to offer the very best products and services in higher education software. We are committed to delivering a user-experience that transforms the way our clients operate and engage with their constituents. We accomplish this through the continual deployment of best-in-class technology, and the focus we place on mutual trust in each and every one of our business relationships. These values form the Terra Dotta difference. For additional information please visit www.terradotta.com