



Miami University  
Assessment

# What do the data say about study abroad and second language learning?

As the university enters a discussion about globalizing the Miami Plan, it is important to recognize what we know about the impact of study abroad and second language learning on our students. This *Brief* summarizes current discussions about the Global Miami Plan and provides information about the impact of study abroad/second language learning on our students.

## Revising the Curriculum

Currently, about one-third of Miami undergraduates participate in some kind of study abroad program and the university has set a long-range goal of 50% participation. Recognizing the increasing interdependence of the world communities, efforts are underway to increase the emphasis on global understanding in the Miami Plan. A recent Provost committee recommended that every student should study a foreign language, that most students should complete a study abroad program, and that the Miami Plan curriculum should have a global focus (see [www.muohio.edu/provost/reports.cfm](http://www.muohio.edu/provost/reports.cfm)).

Based on these recommendations the University Liberal Education Council developed a set of recommendations for the Miami Plan Foundation area to be more global in orientation (see [www.muohio.edu/led](http://www.muohio.edu/led)). Among the recommendations being discussed is including a Global Perspectives category that includes options for foreign language study, taking globally oriented courses, or studying abroad. The study abroad option would reward students with 3 less credit hours required than the other areas.

## Research on Study Abroad and Second Language Learning

But what do we know about students who study abroad and the impact of such studies on their education? First, Assistant Dean of Students Andrew Beckett analyzed data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and found that Miami seniors who studied abroad had significantly higher ( $p < .05$ ) NSSE benchmark scores than those who did not study abroad.

Study abroad students perceived a greater degree of academic challenge at Miami, were more likely to engage in active/collaborative learning, engaged more in interactions with faculty, perceived the Miami environment as a more enriching educational experience, and generally felt the campus was a supportive environment. Likewise, first year students who expected to study abroad also scored significantly higher on the five NSSE benchmark scores. Perhaps these data suggest that students who plan on and who do study abroad actually engage in their academic experiences in a deeper way than those students who do not plan to study abroad.

In another study Miami professor of German, Dr. Ruth Sanders, reports that, “published research indicates that foreign language study not only represents a path to the acquisition of the means of communication and expression but also fosters the cognitive development that lies at the core of education” (“Focus on Form: Foreign Language Study and Cognitive Development,” *The Association of Departments of Foreign Languages Bulletin*, 38(1-2), 2007; p. 42). Sanders also reports that research indicates that students who learn a foreign language show improvement in their native language competencies as well. Finally, Sanders makes a strong case for how second language learning requires skills embedded in each of the four Miami Plan principles.

Finally, while not directly comparing students who study abroad with those who do not, the CIRP (Cooperative Institutional Research Program) longitudinal study asked students how important “improving my understanding of other countries and cultures” was to them in their undergraduate studies. In the longitudinal study, 42% of Miami first year students and 68 % of Miami seniors indicated this was “essential” or “very important.” What is most interesting, however, is that the increase from first years to seniors – 26% - was over twice that of students in the comparison sample (all public institutions).

Thus, as we discuss efforts to globalize our curriculum, keep in mind that study abroad and foreign language learning can have a very positive educational outcome for our students.