Outcomes Associated with the District of Columbia Public Schools Study Abroad Program
Synthesis of Research Findings 2016–2018

LAURA C. ENGEL
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**AUTHOR**

**Laura C. Engel**, Associate Professor of International Education and International Affairs, The George Washington University

**Author’s Note**

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INTRODUCTION

Study abroad has been widely considered critical in developing students’ global competence and college and career readiness. However, study abroad participation has generally been higher for white students than for students of color, and for students in affluent schools than for those in less economically advantaged schools. In Washington, DC, schools in more affluent neighborhoods and schools with competitive application processes have a long tradition of offering education abroad, but many students whose families cannot afford such opportunities have been precluded from participating.

In recognition of this inequitable access to global learning and travel, the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) launched a fully funded study abroad program for middle and high school students in 2016. The DCPS Study Abroad program is guided by the central principle that “equitable access to global opportunities is an expectation, not an exception, for every student.” The program covers the full cost of travel for students, regardless of family income.

This research brief synthesizes the main findings from three years of studies (2016–2018) of the DCPS Study Abroad program conducted by a research team at the George Washington University (GW). The research team collected data each year through interviews, surveys, and methods of analysis described in Box A on page 2.

DCPS STUDY ABROAD PARTICIPANTS

In three years, DCPS Study Abroad has sent more than 1,400 students and educators from 43 secondary schools on 64 trips to 18 countries (including a globally-focused trip to New York City). The majority of DCPS Study Abroad participants are students of color (Figure 1) from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds. The program is open to middle and high school students regardless of GPA, including students in special education programs and students attending Opportunity Academies, which typically serve overage and under-credited students.

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Students participating in DCPS Study Abroad travel in groups with peers from other DCPS schools; the groups are led by educators called Travel Ambassadors (TAs). Students and educators must apply to participate in the program. Individual selection is weighted in favor of students who do not have previous travel experience, and the number of placements per school is weighted by the school’s percentage of children from low-income families. Travelers are distributed across all eight DC Wards (Table 1). Once accepted to the program, students participate in pre-departure sessions in the spring, engage in education abroad for 8–20 days in the summer, complete and present a Making Global Local project in the fall, and join an alumni community.

Box A. Summary of Study Methods

Findings are based on three annual mixed methods studies, which follow a concurrent parallel design, meaning that qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analyzed separately and findings were combined during a final interpretative phase. Across all three studies, qualitative data was collected through 68 semi-structured, individual interviews with a purposive and convenience sample of students; 1 focus group with middle school students and parents; and interviews with 3 DCPS program directors or program officers and 18 educators involved as Travel Ambassadors in the program. Quantitative data were collected using a series of surveys taken by students before, immediately after, and six months after travel in 2017 and 2018. Descriptive analyses (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were conducted to give researchers a better understanding of student participants’ demographic information, such as gender, grade, and race, as well as their travel regions and previous travel histories. In addition, paired sample t-tests were conducted on two rounds of surveys to examine whether program participants gain statistically significant progress in certain aspects (e.g., academic engagement, adaptability, gratitude, and intercultural sensitivity) immediately after travel in 2017 and 2018.²

Table 1. Distribution of Travelers by DC Ward, 2016–2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DC Ward</th>
<th>Percentage of Travelers from Ward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

² Response rates: 2017 pre-travel (65%), immediate post-travel (33%). 2018 pre-travel (43%), immediate post-travel (17%). We do not use results from six months post-travel survey in this report due to low response rates.
SUMMARY OF STUDENT OUTCOMES

A synthesis of findings across three years of studies shows positive student outcomes associated with participation in the DCPS Study Abroad program, including the following:

1. Stronger academic engagement
2. Enhanced self-confidence, independence, and stronger relationships with peers
3. Greater interest in attending college and pursuing further travel opportunities
4. Increased aspirations for future careers in international service
5. Increased global competence

Evidence for each of these outcomes is described below. Significant survey findings with illustrative responses are summarized in Table 3 at the end of this paper.

1. Stronger Academic Engagement

Research suggests that DCPS Study Abroad participants returned with increased motivation and persistence in their academic studies and a greater interest in global-themed coursework and world language study. On surveys, students responded that they were significantly more likely to “work hard on my schoolwork” and to “pay attention in class.” In interviews, students reported becoming more engaged in class, taking additional language courses, and challenging themselves academically after their study abroad experience. “When I got back, I took a class at GW—I studied psychology,” said a student during an interview. Another student commented, “I started studying Mandarin in 9th grade…but now I’m learning Japanese and Korean, which I’m doing on my own time” (2016).

The GW research team also conducted two types of preliminary analyses of grade point averages (GPAs) of student travelers. The first analysis, a paired sample t-test, compared the GPAs of high school (11th grade) student travelers at two points in time, six months before travel and six months after travel, and found statistically significant increases (sig. < 0.001) in mean GPA after travel in both 2016 and 2017. The second, an independent t-test, compared the GPAs of high school student

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3 The 2017 survey showed strong significance of scores indicating increasing academic engagement by students after they traveled, t (98)=−30.673, p<0.001.
4 Quotations are from student interviews for this study; the year of the interview is shown in parentheses.
travelers and a control group of students who applied for the DCPS Study Abroad program but were not selected.\textsuperscript{5} This analysis showed significantly larger gains in GPA for student travelers who had medium and low GPAs\textsuperscript{6} than for control group students with medium and low GPAs.\textsuperscript{7} (Differences between the travelers and control groups were not significant for students with high GPAs.) These results indicate a positive association between the DCPS Study Abroad Program and high school students’ GPAs, especially for those with medium and low GPAs.


Education abroad frequently creates opportunities for students to face and meet new challenges and, in doing so, to develop new ideas about themselves and their capabilities. Students who participated in DCPS Study Abroad showed broad social development in areas like self-concept, self-confidence, and self-efficacy, as suggested by the following interview statements:

\textit{It reassured me that I still have potential (2016).}

\textit{The experience made me really tell myself that I'm a strong individual and a powerful person (2017).}

\textit{I did see myself change. It was a lot of stuff going down there [that] I told myself that I wouldn't be able to do, but when I got down there, I was able to do (2017).}

Students were able to deepen their sense of self-identity as a result of their study abroad experience, particularly with regard to racial/ethnic identity. For example, an African American traveler to Ecuador in 2016 was affected by a new realization of the global reach of the African diaspora beyond the United States. A traveler to Senegal in 2017 noted his connections and pride in his personal ancestry and history, which he described as “going home” and “empowering.” In all three years, native Spanish-speaking students traveling to Spanish-speaking contexts reconnected with their heritage and described feelings of pride in being able to translate for their peers—an experience that helped to enrich their self-identity as a bilingual and biliterate citizen on a global scale, they reported.

\textsuperscript{5} Control group $t(404) = -1.739, p= 0.083 < 0.01$.

\textsuperscript{6} Students in the middle 46% GPA of the group were defined as medium GPA students, while students in the bottom 27% GPA were defined as low GPA students.

\textsuperscript{7} Student travelers $M=2.767, SD= .510$; control group $M=2.871, SD= .510$. 
The DCPS Study Abroad experience also encouraged students to form positive relationships with their peers and with adults. One student explained it in this way:

*I thought that I was a really shy person and that when I got to high school, I wouldn’t make any friends because I was too shy. When I learned that I could make friends [in DCPS Study Abroad], it changed the way I saw how I am as a person and how different I can do things* (2018).

The large majority (93%) of the students surveyed in 2017 said they “got to know new friends.” One in four students ranked making new friends from DC as the most important experience after travel. These relationships persisted after travel, and students frequently reported in interviews and the focus group that they communicate on a regular basis with fellow travelers. Because the program is district-wide and students from different neighborhoods and schools travel together, “kids are meeting other kids who are really different from them, and who have really different life experiences, stories, and identities. They learn to get along, and to be friends. That’s super powerful for them, as a young person, and as an adult” (DCPS program officer, 2018). Many students also formed strong relationships with the educators who accompanied students on the trips.

Upon returning home, students frequently reported becoming more independent and confident in their choices, as suggested by the number of survey respondents who agreed that “I can be more decisive” (2017) and “I am my own person” (2017). In the interviews and focus group, students, educators, and parents indicated that many Study Abroad participants became more outgoing. For example, students seemed to be more comfortable meeting new people, which would help them whether they were 9th graders entering high school or 12th graders planning to go to college. Students also reported speaking up more in class and feeling like their knowledge and opinions matter more. One Travel Ambassador expected these types of internal changes to have longer-term effects on students. “The things that they saw, the things that they learned are going to color how they make choices about what classes they take, what they major in, what they do in the future,” said that TA (2018).

3. Greater Interest in Attending College and Pursuing Future Travel Opportunities

Students consistently noted that their aspirations to attend college had intensified after participating in DCPS Study Abroad. A 2017 traveler, who had been thinking about applying to college, said in an interview that “study abroad has actually helped me put my foot down” in that direction. As students became more comfortable with
unfamiliar environments in other countries, they seemed better able to consider adapting to college. “I feel like because of that trip, now I can be away at college,” said one student. “I can actually focus on the experience of college and actually focus on my academics” (2018). Several students noted that not only had their interest in going to college increased, but so had their desire to study abroad again, as evidenced by these student comments:

*It made me want to attend college more because I wanted to study abroad again (2017).*

*Every college I visit or every college that visits my school, the first thing I ask them [is], ‘Do you have a study abroad program?’ because I know that that’s what I want to do (2017).*

Students with a GPA in the range of 3.0-3.4 who participated in DCPS Study Abroad were more likely to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), applied to more colleges, and were more likely to be admitted to one or more colleges, compared with students in a similar GPA range who did not participate in the program. DCPS data shows that 78.5% of the 2017 travelers are currently enrolled in college.

**4. Increased Aspirations for Future Careers in International Service**

Students participating in DCPS Study Abroad reported their interest in future international service work in areas ranging from epidemiology to national security. Interviewed students often talked about the Peace Corps, the State Department, Doctors without Borders and other internationally focused organizations as future career possibilities. As one student said, “I don’t come from a place where I get to choose. I never grew up like that. So that’s why I was so open to everything. And I think the trip sealed the deal. I want to do international affairs” (2018). Additionally, 74% of surveyed students in 2018 reported that they would like to volunteer in another country after their travel experience. For several students, the most compelling outcome of study abroad has been the desire to explore the world beyond their current environment: “I want to go, get out of DC, see what’s out there for me—there are other things out there,” noted one student (2017).

**5. Increased Global Competence**

More students identified as global citizens after their travel experience and reflected many of the attributes associated with global citizenship and intercultural competence. These include an interest in exploring global issues and taking action
on globally oriented problems; recognition and appreciation for multiple cultural perspectives; and communication with others from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Participants in DCPS Study Abroad showed gains in intercultural sensitivity\(^8\) and enjoyment of cross-cultural social interactions. According to surveys, students returned home more confident about “interacting with people from different cultures.” In particular, native English speakers showed significant increases in intercultural sensitivity after travel.

While abroad, students in DCPS Study Abroad had opportunities to practice foreign languages in an immersive and spontaneous context. Survey and interview data showed that these opportunities have been helpful for monolingual students who are acquiring a world language. Students overwhelmingly reported that although communicating in another language while abroad was challenging, they came back home more motivated to study a world language because they saw its tangible benefits. Some multilingual students saw the value of knowing another language when they were able to speak their native language abroad, which suggests that education abroad can powerfully harness students’ existing linguistic capital.\(^9\)

Findings across three years point to an increase in students’ curiosity and connections with others. In pre-travel surveys, students ranked things like food and community service as highly important; after travel, they put greater priority on practicing a foreign language and meeting new people who live in another country (see Table 2 on page 8).

DCPS students frequently spoke positively about their experiences interacting with local youth in public spaces, such as markets and parks. These findings are particularly significant for students who had left Washington, DC for the first time (roughly one-third of the travelers each year). Surveys showed that after studying abroad, these first-time travelers were more likely to feel “observant when interacting with people from different cultures” (2018 survey), to “appreciate and enjoy that there are differences between peers from other cultural backgrounds and myself” (2018), and to “be as sociable as I want to be when interacting with people from different cultures.”


cultures” (2017). In addition, “learning to be more open” and “adapt” was a common theme in all three years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Pre-Travel Percentage Ranking First (n=182)</th>
<th>Post-Travel Percentage Ranking First (n=72)</th>
<th>Change Pre- and Post-Travel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning about the country’s culture and visiting historic sites</td>
<td>38.6%</td>
<td>32.1%</td>
<td>↓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting new people who live in another country</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>↑ 3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trying new food</td>
<td>25.1%</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td>↓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practicing your foreign language</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>↑ 7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing community service</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
<td>↑ 0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making new friends from DC</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>↓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Experiences that were ranked as first in importance by a greater percentage of students are emphasized in bold.

Comments from interviewed students showed an increased ability to analyze world issues and see situations from multiple perspectives. After experiencing new places, students demonstrated a greater propensity to think critically about the world and their local community and to ask questions about such issues as the unequal distribution of resources. The answers to those questions led a number of students to work for change in their local communities, from simple things such as recycling, picking up litter, and turning off the lights, to larger campaigns to distribute resources more equally. In 2018, 76% of surveyed students reported an interest in getting involved in community organizing for greater social change after traveling. These findings suggest that education abroad is associated with enriched global and local social consciousness and civic engagement.
SUMMARY OF TEACHER/EDUCATOR OUTCOMES

In addition to conducting student interviews, the GW research team interviewed 18 Travel Ambassadors (TAs) participating in the DCPS Study Abroad program in 2017 and 2018. These interviews not only focused on TAs’ perceptions of student outcomes in order to triangulate students’ self-reported interview data, but also focused on teachers’ global competence and other outcomes of the Study Abroad program for TAs.

A synthesis of findings from two years of TA interviews (2017-2018) revealed three primary outcomes for participating educators:

1. Stronger relationships with students
2. Growth in student-centered teaching
3. Enhanced teacher global competence

1. Stronger Relationships with Students

Educators expressed significant development in their relationships with students. “I was surprised at how well I bonded with the kids,” said one TA. “I wasn’t really expecting that. I am dreaming of their futures now too.”

The majority of interviewed TAs remained in regular contact with students with whom they traveled. Seeing students outside of the DC context and having a global experience together enriched TAs’ positive views of students. TAs often described students as caring for each other and being vulnerable, excited, courageous, curious, hard-working, considerate, and determined to make a positive change in their world. Students “jumped right in to participate,” “stepped up to challenges,” “watched out for each other,” and “buckled down,” according to TAs’ interviews. One TA described students’ positive relationships with teachers in this way:

The trip confirmed something I already believed. When children, especially urban children, feel like you care, they’re more receptive to learning. I felt like the children overall, they respected us and treated us with respect because they knew we cared, and because they knew we had their backs.

2. Growth in Student-Centered Teaching

TAs associated the global experience with meaningful changes in their behavior and practices as educators, reporting a shift toward more student-centered approaches.
Comments from two TAs illustrate the impact of the DCPS Study Abroad experiences on participants’ teaching:

[The experience helped me] become more student focused, watching the students, letting them be in the experience without interjecting my own thoughts…I brought that back [to my classroom] with me, the ability to kind of step back and let people unfold the way that they’re going to unfold in the experience, and then just stepping in when it’s necessary to step in.

I really have to think of how am I going to provide curriculum and criteria and meet all students where they’re at, regardless of their academic standing.

These reflections demonstrate the importance of allowing students to explore, connect, discover, and interpret their own experiences in relevant ways that inspire them to seek greater learning and involvement in the future.

3. Enhanced Teacher Global Competence

Following a global experience with students, educators discussed how their own global competence had developed. “[Now] I think of myself in the world as someone who really can make a global impact—someone who can empower a large group of people to be able to make change happen,” said one TA. That same TA added that she was motivated to provide more global opportunities to students in her own school setting:

[Travel] helped me develop a growth mindset, to provide more opportunities for underserved students. It made an impact on my colleagues as well, towards having a growth mindset on what it is that our students can accomplish and the things that we can do if we provide them the opportunity.

Many TAs spoke about an interest in fostering and leading future travel and extracurricular activities with students.

CONCLUSION

Study abroad is frequently regarded as life-changing and transformative, associated with education and career attainment; personal growth and identity development; and intercultural development.10 Our research over the past three years on the DCPS

Study Abroad program (2016–2018) has focused on specific indicators of change and is suggestive of a powerful association between global experiences and student learning. Students who participated in this program showed broad social development in areas like self-concept, self-efficacy, and positive relationships with other peers, all crucial to educating the whole child. These attributes are also linked to indicators of enhanced academic engagement, including motivation, persistence, and aspirations for future college opportunities, travel, and international career pathways. Furthermore, early evidence from research on academic performance of student travelers suggests that there is a statistically significant increase in GPA after travel compared with before travel, and that global travel may have positive associations with academic achievement for students with low and medium GPAs. Lastly, student participants in DCPS Study Abroad tended to identify with attributes associated with global citizenship and intercultural competence, including adaptability and open-mindedness, and to show an interest in investigating the world beyond DC and engaging in their local communities.

Beyond student outcomes, findings show the effects of global travel on teachers’ classroom practices and instructional approaches, including teachers reporting new commitments to student-centered, collaborative learning. Educators who accompanied students on global travel also reported developing positive and lasting relationships with students that extended beyond the classroom. These outcomes link to national trends pointing to the significance of student-centered and culturally relevant pedagogies and the benefits of positive adult-to-student relationships.
Research suggests that (1) increased gratitude is linked to desirable developmental outcomes for individuals, specifically in personal identity and social development, overall happiness, and well-being, and is predictive of higher GPA and lower rates of depression; and (2) adolescence is a critical time developmentally for enhancing gratitude because of increased perspective-taking ability and the development of identity that normally occurs during this period (see, e.g., Emmons, R. A., & McCullough, M. E. (2003). Counting blessings versus burdens: An experimental investigation of gratitude and subjective well-being in daily life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 84*(2), 377–389 and Froh, J. J., Bono, G., & Emmons, R. (2010). Being grateful is beyond good manners: Gratitude and motivation to contribute to society among early adolescents. *Motivation and Emotion, 34*(2), 144–157.

### Table 3. Summary of Significant Findings from 2017 and 2018 Surveys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Significant Items for Pre-Post Travel (sig. &lt;0.05)</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Significant Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RAPS Engagement</td>
<td>“I work very hard on my schoolwork.”</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>All groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I pay attention in class.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td>“In uncertain situations, I am able to find new ways of going about things (e.g. different way of asking questions or finding information) to help me through.”</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Students leaving US for the first time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“To help me in a new situation, I am able to change the way I do things.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercultural</td>
<td>“I can be as sociable as I want to be when interacting with people from different cultures.”</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Students leaving Washington, DC, for the first time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity</td>
<td>“I am very observant when interacting with people from different cultures.”</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Native English speakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I appreciate and enjoy that there are differences between peers from other cultural backgrounds and myself.”</td>
<td></td>
<td>Students who traveled to South America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global Competence</td>
<td>“I see myself as global citizen.”</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>All groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td>“I feel lucky to live the life that I do.”</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Students who speak other languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Students who traveled to Africa and Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Students leaving Washington, DC, for the first time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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