



Open Access International Education

Understanding Who Studies Abroad at Community Colleges

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to examine student demographic and academic characteristics to predict study abroad participation among students enrolled at a single community college in the U.S. Southeast. Results indicated that the study abroad participation patterns of students at this community college sometimes mirrored those of students in the four-year sector (for example, male students were less likely to participate), but that other patterns differed markedly (for example, part-time students were more likely to participate). These findings suggest that lessons learned from research on study abroad participation at four-year institutions cannot simply be applied to policy and practice in community college study abroad programming and that community college education abroad must be examined in its own right.

KEY POINTS

- At this institution, part-time students were more likely to study abroad than full-time students, indicating that these students should not be ignored in national and institutional conversations surrounding who participates in international education.
- Community college students representing a variety of race/ethnicity groups were equally as likely to study abroad, a finding that suggests that community colleges have the potential to serve a democratizing role in U.S. international education, at least along the lines of this particular student demographic.
- Community college students eligible for need-based financial aid were less likely to study abroad, underscoring the need to provide financial support for these students.
- Students with any declared degree objective, whether a transfer-focused degree, technical degree, or certificate, were more likely to study abroad, suggesting a need for international educators to communicate the relevance of study abroad to students in a variety of fields.

THE PROJECT

Although community colleges have offered study abroad for over 50 years, these institutions are often neglected in conversations surrounding international education in the United States. International education at community colleges is especially important for students who do not have plans or who are unable to transfer to the four-year sector, as well as for community members who look to the community college to provide opportunities for further education. Moreover, because community colleges are often the point of entry to higher education for marginalized student populations, increased attention to international education at community colleges has important implications from an equity perspective. While scholars, scholar-practitioners, and practitioners often focus attention on four-year colleges and universities when they think about study abroad, this study addresses the topic of who studies abroad from within the community college context. This work is important because it mitigates the assumption that implications of research from the four-year sector apply seamlessly to the community college context.

The community college that provided data for this study is located in a large, urban community in the U.S. Southeast. Like many community colleges, this institution offers a wide variety of educational opportunities, such as certificate programs, technical degrees, and associate degrees. Students with intentions to transfer to a four-year institution are able to access opportunities through articulation agreements with four-year institutions. Students are able to study abroad in both spring and fall terms, and study abroad programs are primarily short-term (six weeks long or less). These programs provide students with opportunities to travel to a wide variety of countries and are not confined to a single region of the world.

Data were analyzed using event history modeling, a type of regression analysis that allows for the incorporation of information that changes over time. This kind of analytic approach is important for this study because many of the student characteristics that might relate to the decision to study abroad change over time. For example, a student's degree program or field of study is very likely to change as the student's career and academic interests shift or become more focused. An event history model accounts for these changes over time.

This study's results are displayed visually in *Figure 1*, which summarizes the hazard ratio of all variables that were significant in the event history model. Hazard ratios above 1 correspond to student characteristics that were positively related to study abroad participation and hazard ratios below 1 correspond to student characteristics that were negatively related to study abroad participation. Specifically, negative relationships were observed for full-time student status, men, and a student's eligibility for need-based financial aid. Positive relationships included the declaration of any sort of intended degree program (compared to not having declared any degree intention at all), a student's GPA, and in-state student status. Note that some variables, such as race/ethnicity, are not displayed in this figure. This is because these variables were not significant. That is, students representing all race/ethnicity groups were equally as likely to study abroad at this institution.

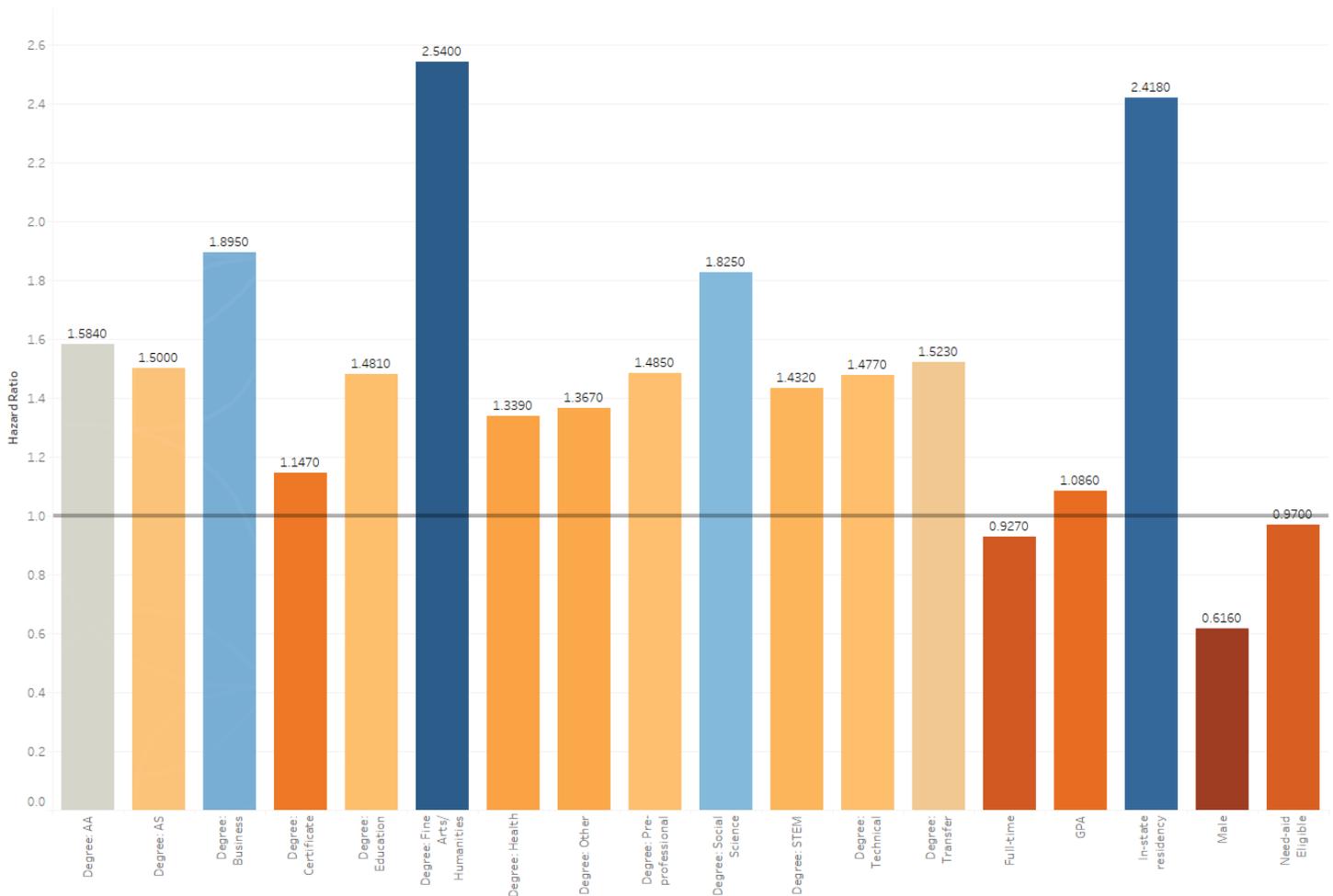


Figure 1. Summary of analytic results

FOR DECISION MAKERS: IMPACT ON POLICY AND PRACTICE

In light of these results, decision-makers at community colleges who are interested in advancing study abroad should:

- Take into account the needs of part-time students when designing education abroad programming. Part-time students are interested in the opportunity to study abroad and do participate in these programs. At this institution, these students were more likely to study abroad than full-time students.
- Explore potential funding possibilities for community college students who want to study abroad while keeping in mind that funding is not the only reason why community college students with international interests are unable to participate.
- Consider how best to communicate the relevance of study abroad to students studying a variety of fields and with a diversity of career goals. For example, while students seeking a technical degree may not be the first students that come to mind when considering who participates in education abroad, these results indicate that these students are both interested in and take advantage of study abroad opportunities.

CONCLUSION

This study's findings indicate that community college students who participate in study abroad exhibit characteristics that are different from our stereotypical image of a study abroad student. For this reason, the results of prior research that focus on study abroad among students attending four-year institutions may not apply in the community college context. Community college study abroad students are diverse, they attend school both part-time and full-time, and they represent many different degree programs and career objectives. While

funding may be an obstacle to their participation in study abroad, it is not the only obstacle or, even, the most important. Community college leaders and professionals must keep the diversity of students in mind when making key decisions about study abroad programs, such as when programs are offered and where they go. Policies and practices should aim to maintain, and even enhance, the diversity of students who study abroad through community colleges.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

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FURTHER READING

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