

Reflections from Brazil: Improving International Research Experiences for Graduate Students

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Abstract:

The authors reflect upon an international research experience accompanying their doctoral advisor to conduct social scientific research about college access and funding in a private university in Brazil. By considering how international experiences for graduate students might mirror or depart from the traditional “study abroad” experiences for undergraduates, they offer advice for future graduate student/faculty international research partnerships. To maximize the benefits of international field research, graduate students should see themselves not only as gatherers and analyzers of data, but also as cultural ambassadors. Additional mentorship and enhanced financial support will greatly enhance these learning experiences and increase the likelihood of graduate student participation. While all outcomes cannot be foreseen in advance, planning for and participating in international research experiences may yield many positive benefits that support the holistic growth of graduate students who may seek careers inside or outside of the Academy.

Key Words:

International, Research, Graduate Education, Higher Education, College, University, Global, Exchange, Brazil, Study Abroad.

Introduction

Each year, less than 1% of all doctoral students in the United States study abroad (Open Doors, 2017). While we should not expect for the pervasive undergraduate

model of a “junior year abroad” to be a central feature of graduate education, it is nonetheless concerning that so few future faculty members, researchers, professionals, policymakers, and thought-leaders have a meaningful global experience as part of their advanced studies. While there is a growing body of research about international experiences in graduate education (Anderson Sathe & Geisler, 2016; Lightfoot & Lee, 2015; Linder & McGaha, 2013; Squire et al., 2015), the Academy lacks consistent standards to meet the needs of this targeted population.

In this reflective essay, we consider how participating in a short-term, international field research partnership in Brazil positively influenced our growth as higher education scholar-practitioners. We explain how we leveraged our time abroad to support many goals and attempt to write the primer we wish we consulted in our pre-trip planning. These insights can inform the design of future graduate student/faculty international partnerships and can increase the number of graduate student participants in global exchanges. While some considerations are specific to our case, we generalized the lessons to support learners working in other regions and academic disciplines.

Comparing Global Experiences for Undergraduate and Graduate Students

The unique needs of graduate students should inform the design of international experiences at the master’s and doctoral level. While international experiences for undergraduate and graduate students might seek to achieve similar outcomes—for instance, developing cultural awareness, supporting students’ growth as global citizens, and deepening content knowledge learning opportunities should be structured differently to achieve them (Linder & McGaha, 2013). From the outset, we might assume that experiences for graduate students will be inherently more independent in nature to reflect the maturity and focus of participants. For instance, whereas study abroad programs for undergraduate are likely to have explicit rules and conduct expectations, any *in loco parentis* provisions (i.e., curfews) are unnecessary for adult learners. While both student populations may experience culture shock, graduate students are less likely to struggle with homesickness or with the demands of independent-living.

At the same time, our experiences reveal that graduate students benefit from having direction and guidance to support their growth as researchers. The research literature affirmed that providing support for undergraduates’ reentry and assimilation into their home culture is essential for deep learning (La Brack & Bathurst, 2012; Young, 2014); we have every reason to believe that this principle also applies to graduate students. We used our experiences in Brazil to illustrate ways that graduate learners can comport themselves before, during, and after an international experience to deepen their learning and calibrate their expectations.

Positionality

From our shared constructivist epistemology, we believe that our social identities and past experiences inform how we perceive and make sense of the world. By acknowledging our perspectives at the outset, we enable readers to understand how *who* we are informed *what* we think. We both identify as White, cis-gender, straight women who, at the time of our research trip to Brazil, were working full-time as professional staff members in higher education. Concurrently, we were each pursuing a

doctorate in educational leadership at a public, research-intensive university in the southern United States. We wrote this essay using personal pronouns and collaborated on writing the sections that follow.

Though this was our first visit to Brazil, our assumptions were shaped by past travel and study abroad experiences. As an adjunct faculty member at a private college, (Author 1) facilitated three service-learning trips for undergraduate students to the Caribbean. (Author 2) participated in undergraduate study abroad programs in Spain, Costa Rica, and Mexico. These experiences gave her the skills and confidence to travel on her own to Buenos Aires to collect data for her master's thesis.

In 2015, midway through the first year of our doctoral program, we accompanied our academic advisor to Porto Alegre, Brazil to work with her longstanding collaborators at a private university. As one of the most diverse countries in the world, Brazil is the ideal place to investigate the impact of a decade-old national affirmative action policy to expand college access. Our advisor has made this trip annually for more than a decade as part of her larger research program focused on changing student demographics, international educational partnerships, and the funding climate surrounding global higher education. It is her regular practice to invite advisees to assist with data collection, analysis, and other collaborations with these Brazilian counterparts.

Laying the Ground Work for Success

Recognizing the more independent nature of graduate education, there is a considerable onus on master's and doctoral students to fully avail themselves of resources at their own institution and international research partners. Whereas faculty leaders and program administrators handle trip logistics and provide structured orientations for undergraduates, graduate students must be empowered to anticipate and attend to their own needs. Even though we are both seasoned travelers, preparing for our international research trip required substantial time and energy. At times, these added tasks felt especially stressful for us as we balanced the demands of our graduate program and our full-time jobs, but this preparatory work proved to be critical to our later success. In the section that follows, we elaborate some general recommendations for graduate researchers who pursue international research opportunities.

Language, history, and culture. We aimed to make full use of available university resources to fill the gaps in our knowledge of Brazilian history and culture. The Brazil Center at our home university offered ample programmatic support in our pre-trip planning year. Brazil Center staff and online language programs helped us acquire some basic phrases in conversational Portuguese—which was appreciated by our hosts, but not necessary for our research. Our academic department offered an elective course in Comparative Higher Education and we chose to use a class assignment to deepen our knowledge of the Brazilian education system. Moreover, we found it beneficial to look beyond our program to identify relevant interdisciplinary resources; by enrolling in conference courses in the Latin American Studies program, we earned credits toward our doctoral degrees and strengthened our topical knowledge before the trip. We reached out to other graduate students who had worked with our advisor in the past and picked the brains of native Brazilians to learn more about the culture. Although these support structures will vary across universities, we encourage graduate students

to be creative and to leverage the full breadth of their universities (and personal networks) to supply foundational knowledge about the context and culture of their destination.

Funding and logistics. We posit that cost may be an inhibiting factor that limits many graduate students from taking part in international research. To overcome this structural obstacle, we encourage students to allow up to a year to seek out financial support—such as grants from their universities as well as awards from private foundations and federal or state agencies. We sought support from our academic department and college, interdisciplinary programs, and campus centers. While some students might be eligible for large awards, we managed to subsidize our travel by piecing together several smaller awards (\$500-\$800 each). We also managed to keep costs low by sharing a rented apartment in a residential neighborhood and making use of airline reward miles. The international office at our university helped us to secure the necessary visas, get the recommended vaccinations, and identify resources in case of an emergency. While we encourage graduate students to be entrepreneurial in their efforts to secure funding, we believe that if universities made funds more readily available, the percentage of participating students would dramatically increase.

Reflecting on goals and mentorship. In the months leading up to our departure, balancing the demands of our coursework and scurrying to finalize trip logistics, we wish that we had devoted more time reflecting on our goals for the trip. In addition to supporting the research efforts of our advisor, we should have put more thought into what we—as individuals and fledging academics—wanted to get out of the experience. As first-year doctoral students, we had yet to establish our own research agendas. We suspect that we are not alone among novice researchers in that saying that we would have benefitted from having more guidance to translate our broad interests into specific projects. This represents an instance when the independent-nature of international research experiences for graduate students can be problematic—students may lack the knowledge and skills to do this on their own. Graduate students, especially those who are early in their programs, are still developing a mastery of subject-matter and research methods. While we made a concerted effort to strengthen our knowledge of Brazil, in hindsight, we were not well equipped to recognize our limitations as novice researchers.

Balancing multiple responsibilities. Familial, professional, educational, and other obligations can make long-term international travel for graduate students difficult. Short-term international research experiences—few weeks to a month in length—are likely most appealing for graduate students. While graduate students need to arrange for the time they will be out of the country, they must also be realistic about their commitments and prepare accordingly. By traveling over the summer, we took advantage of a natural lull in the academic calendar so as not to neglect our respective professional duties at the universities where we worked. By limiting our travel to a few weeks, we were able to take paid leave from our full-time jobs. At the same time, we remember feeling that we were maxed out—perhaps we should have cut back on things like attending an academic conference a few weeks before the trip—to better direct our energies.

Achieving Balance In-Country

In Brazil, we often felt conflicted about how to divide our time between accomplishing research goals and being respectful cultural ambassadors. On the one hand, we felt some urgency to use our limited time in country to meet with university representatives, collect institutional data, and contribute to the team's writing projects. On the other, we wanted to experience a new culture, establish meaningful collaborative relationships, and give back through community outreach. Getting the balance right, while also recognizing that travel and field research can be exhausting endeavors, demanded constant attention and readjustment.

Our schedule included informal activities to get to know our Brazilian hosts and the local community. On our first day, for instance, we attended a welcome luncheon with more than a dozen researchers and their families, featuring *feijoada*—a hearty black bean stew—Brazil's national dish. We even engaged in the ritualized exchange of token gifts (thankfully, due to our pre-trip research, we came prepared!). During our first week, we met with representatives from the international office at the host university, gave presentations about our developing research interests, posed for group photos, attended receptions, and shared in the customary leisurely mid-day meal with local graduate students. One of our favorite outreach activities was visiting a local high school where the students performed a cultural dance and had countless questions for us about colleges and American culture. This activity was both rewarding and enjoyable—we were able to encourage these young people to seek out higher education opportunities in their country and we were able to enjoy the local culture. Graduate students might satisfy their dual impulses as scholars and travelers by engaging in service-learning and other forms of community outreach like this.

Though it was hard not to be flattered by this special attention, at times, we recall feeling concerned that these social events hindered our time to gather and analyze data. Our four-person research team found that it was productive to divide, conquer, and sometimes politely decline invitations. We tried to be accommodating guests while also finding ways to control our time and energy. This might mean that a few of us would accept a social invitation while the others stayed behind to write and analyze data. At one point, the four of us declined an invitation to spend a few nights visiting a small town in the mountains, which we determined would require too great an investment of time to be worthwhile. To be strategic with our time, we divided responsibilities across multiple research projects. The two of us focused primarily on writing a journal article about grants to Brazilian universities while the other student and our advisor focused on international partnerships. As a team, we remained in constant communication to troubleshoot obstacles and to stay apprised of our collective progress.

Finally, it was important for us to acknowledge the challenges of field research in a bilingual, cross-cultural setting. While we enjoyed each other's company and shared the same commitment to our research goals, it was taxing to put in long days at the university only to come back to close quarters and shared lodging. Learning to set boundaries and finding ways to be attentive to the needs of individuals as well as the group as a whole is critical for a research team's overall success. We felt fortunate that we had one another's trust to be candid about our own needs, especially in moments of frustration.

Anticipating that other graduate researchers may be conflicted about how to apportion their time abroad, we advise them to be strategic in ensuring their research aims are met, but also to incorporate service-learning opportunities that can help them achieve both academic and cross-cultural goals. Finally, it is important to remain patient in the face of any challenges that emerge with travel and group research.

Upon Returning Home: Keep the Work Going

International graduate research experiences are often designed to produce scholarly research, but these are not limited to projects accomplished while abroad. The relationships we fostered over *feijoada* have resulted in subsequent conference presentations, jointly-written journal articles, and on-going research collaborations. In addition to email exchanges and Skype calls, we have found it especially useful to meet our Brazilian partners at international conferences to work face-to-face. Given that our ambitious research projects could not be completed during our limited time in country, it was essential that we kept the work going upon returning home.

In addition to contributing to our advisor's on-going research on Brazilian higher education, we have begun to develop our own research interests inspired by this experience. Recall that at the outset of the trip, we did not have specific goals for ourselves as researchers. We have since developed new scholarly interests because of our time in Brazil. Together, we have given multiple conference presentations about international graduate student experiences. By writing reflective pieces for our university's bi-annual newsletter and sharing our experiences in platforms such as this one, we have connected with other graduate students and helped them prepare for similar experiences. Just as we had taken courses to deepen our knowledge of Brazilian higher education to prepare for the trip, we furthered our understanding of the topic in subsequent doctoral classes. Inspired by her trip preparation, (Author 2) completed a case study to measure the impact of Brazil Centers in public universities as part of a research methods course. One of the pleasant—and wholly unexpected—outcomes of our international research experience is that we opened our ideas to new topics of study. We encourage other graduate students to remain open to these serendipitous interests—not all outcomes can be known (or anticipated) in advance.

Conclusion

In this essay, we questioned the assumption that just because graduate students are older and more experienced, they are fully equipped to guide their own learning abroad. Our time in Brazil was a pivotal experience in our doctoral education. For us, the transformational value of international research is that it forced us to deal with ambiguity head-on. Despite our advanced preparation, international research experiences are plagued with uncertainties. After a setback in gathering data or trying to make sense of an unexpected finding, we frequently had to ask ourselves: What do we do next? In overcoming each obstacles, we increased our confidence and competence as researchers. Looking back on it now, we are convinced that the skills we developed as a result of this experience—learning to identify and leverage university resources, balancing our time between work and play, forging relationships with research partners, getting hands-on research experience, and gaining confidence to pursue our own independent research projects—were among the most valuable things we learned in our

doctoral program. We believe that other graduate students would be well served by learning to navigate these challenges and participating in international research exchanges. It is imperative that graduate programs recognize the value of these programs and take proactive steps to make them more available and accessible to master's and doctoral students.

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