

# Structuring Study Abroad Programs Around Student Goals

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## Abstract

**The “narratives” that students create around their own study abroad experiences are overwhelmingly experiential and relational.**

What does this suggest about optimal program structure, emphasis and design?

Suggestions distilled from our Siena study:

- **Facilities are Important**

Probably more important than at home. Students abroad are under unprecedented stresses. They usually spend a lot of time at the program site and it serves as a collective “home base.” Small inconveniences are easily magnified, becoming focal points for discontent.

- **Value for Money is Calculated**

Students see themselves as consumers and compare program price with value received. One point of comparison is often independent adventure travel. Programs can be strategic in a) informing students how fees fund the support and experiences they easily value, and b) investing in program amenities that students themselves value.

- **Relationships Within the Program are Crucial**

Program staff and fellow students provide primary social relationships during study abroad. These are most satisfying when a) balanced by outside connections, and b) carefully managed to avoid clique development. Cliques develop surprisingly quickly, in just two or three days, and interfere with productive interpersonal relationships.

- **Experiential Opportunities are Most Valued**

Students value “being there” as the primary learning focus. They want to explore, see, sense and feel the texture of local life. They hunger for entry into backstage areas of life and personal stories of real people. Finding ways to open these backstage areas is essential for program success.

- **Challenges But Not Risks**

Students want personal challenges and independent learning opportunities but still need support, mentoring and structure. Programs should give conscious attention to this push/pull dynamic as it applies to individual student experiences. Teaching students the concept and characteristics of culture shock empowers them.