

Chapter 4

Move Over Medici!

Exploring the Impact of US Student Power in Florence Through Host Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This chapter draws attention to the disconnect between the goal of global learning through mutual cross-cultural exchange with local hosts and the absence of efforts to assess the impact of study abroad students on host communities. When host community impact is considered, it is typically in the context of service-learning in the Global South and ignores more popular and densely saturated sites in Europe. In contribution to filling this gap, this chapter presents data from a study conducted in Florence, Italy that sought to better understand the experience of intentional hosts and gauge what they see as the economic, cultural, educational, and environmental impacts of hosting large numbers of US students. In-depth interviews with 31 local faculty, administrators, and host families provide important insights for how international educators can design programming that mitigates negative impacts on host communities while creating opportunities for equitable, ethical, cross-cultural engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Internationalization efforts within higher education are meant to represent the hope for what education could be – the promulgation of cross-cultural understanding and mutual exchange amongst peoples of the world. Indeed, colleges and universities across the United States continue to place great emphasis on internationalization as a strategic way forward, often captured in institutional strategic internationalization plans, missions, or visions that center the idea of promoting mutual understanding. However, catchphrases like mutual exchange, global citizenship, and the global classroom often go undefined, and are therefore too often operationalized simply in terms of mobility - the sending of US students abroad and the recruitment of international students to US campuses.

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While things like mutual understanding and mutual exchange are assumed outcomes of the study abroad experience, the vast majority of the evaluative research on US study abroad programs is one-sided, focused almost exclusively, on the US participant. Claims of mutuality are often made casually with very little, or in many cases no data collected to explore the experiences of those who are largely responsible for producing the global classroom – that is, the people, places, and structures with which US students interact while they are abroad. Research suggests a great deal about the nature of how the global classroom is consumed by US students; from their motivations to go abroad to their change in attitudes upon return. However, very little is known about the experiences of those who produce their many opportunities for learning while they are overseas. If US higher education takes seriously the intention of study abroad as a way of promoting mutual understanding and good will, why have host communities, the other side of the study abroad encounter, been largely ignored in study abroad program evaluation and research?

The one area where there exists a small, but growing, body of research concerning the experiences of host communities or the relationships between hosts and visiting students is global service learning (Abdi and Shultz, 2015; Andreotti et. al, 2011; Caldwell and Purtzer, 2015; MacDonald and Vorsterman, 2016; Hartman, et. al., 2018; Larsen, 2016) which takes place, almost exclusively, in the Global South. This work is often critical, and explores important issues related to unequal relations of power that can be exacerbated by the socio-cultural hierarchy that is created through the act service. Analyses often focus on the how primarily white student visitors and black or brown local hosts navigate their respective differences in identity and economic status. The fact that the bulk of research on host community impact exists in the service learning literature and not the broader literature on typical study abroad programs creates a false paradigm which supposes that host communities are only impacted by students who intend to positively impact communities through service. Not only does service learning make up a small fraction of education abroad programming, but over 50% of US students who study abroad do so in Europe (Institute of International Education), where host communities are largely reflective of US study abroad student demographics. How, then, are US students impacting communities that host them in more traditional destinations abroad?

This chapter attempts to begin filling this specific gap in the research literature by presenting data and analysis from a case study of the impact of US study abroad programs on the city of Florence, Italy - one of the most popular study abroad destinations for US students. Florence is an ideal case in that at any given time it is estimated that there are over 10,000 US students inhabiting the two-square-mile city center, and there are currently over 50 US colleges and universities that have study centers in Florence. Flipping the script on typical, US-student centric, evaluation methods, this study focuses squarely on the perspectives of intentional hosts, that is, people who intentionally engage with US students while they are abroad through their work. Based on fieldwork, observations, and in-depth qualitative interviews with 31 intentional hosts, including 8 local professors, 1 local university staff member, 17 local study abroad administrators, and 5 local host mothers, the study sought to better understand: what do intentional hosts see as the impact of US student presence in the city and what, if any, overarching factors or discourses influence the engagement between intentional hosts and US study abroad students, according to *hosts*?

Organized around these research questions, this chapter is primarily concerned with making space for host community voices and drawing attention to the overarching discursive factors that not only color their engagement with US students, but their entire lived experiences in the city of Florence. This will be accomplished through exploring several emergent themes from the data, including what host see at the economic, cultural, educational, and environmental impact of hosting US students in Florence.

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