

Voices of Transformation: Chinese Students' Experiences in a Transnational Learning Exchange at Kean University

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter examines how short-term and semester-based study abroad programs within the Global Degree Learning model foster transformative learning. Students progressed from initial disorientation to reflection, meaning reconstruction, and reintegration, developing intercultural competence, self-awareness, resilience, and critical thinking. Intentional program design enhances these holistic personal and academic transformations. The insights have implications for high education leaders and policy makers.

THE GLOBALIZATION OF LEARNING

For decades, higher education students have crossed borders to pursue degrees, a phenomenon now commonly referred to as student mobility. Currently, as of 2022, data on student mobility shows that approximately 6.9 million students worldwide are enrolled in higher education institutions outside their home countries, and these students account for about 2.7% of the global higher education population. (ICEF Monitor, 2025; Times Higher Education, 2023). A particular focus on China, it is known that the tradition of Chinese students pursuing education abroad has deep

historical roots. As early as 1871, thirty young Chinese were sent to the United States to study, marking the beginning of a new era in China's educational system despite the program ending a decade later due to political conflict (Yao, 2004). This momentum carried into the post–World War II years, when Western economies expanded and studying abroad became an even more attractive pathway for Chinese youth seeking knowledge and opportunities. Today, this long-standing tradition continues robustly. According to the Chinese Ministry of Education, the number of students studying abroad rebounded after the pandemic, rising from 451,000 in 2020 to 661,000 in 2022, dipping slightly to 545,000 in 2023, and then increasing again to 704,000 in 2024, returning to pre-pandemic levels (Du, 2025). This continuity illustrates how overseas study has remained a defining element of China's educational and social development for over a century.

In many parts of the world, universities regard overseas study opportunities as a valuable enhancement to higher education. According to the Open Doors 2023 Report on International Educational Exchange, a total of 280,716 U.S. students participated in for-credit study abroad programs during the 2022/23 academic year—representing a 49% increase from the previous year and reflecting continued recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic. These students studied in over 180 destinations across all seven continents, engaging in a wide variety of short-term study abroad programs (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2023).

The literature shows that short-term study abroad programs differ significantly in format, duration, and educational structure. Short-term, faculty-led travel-learn programs, which typically range from one to eight weeks and often take place during summer or winter breaks, are organized around specific academic themes such as sustainability or cultural studies. These programs combine classroom-based instruction with field visits, allowing students to connect theoretical learning with experiential engagement (Tarrant et al., 2014).

Sachau et al. (2010) describe three main models of short-term study abroad programs. The first is the summer semester abroad, which usually lasts six to twelve weeks. In this model, students live on a host university campus and take multiple courses. The weekly structure commonly includes four days of classes and three days for independent travel. Courses combine lectures, guest speakers, and site visits, and may be supported by orientation sessions and online learning modules. Accommodation is typically arranged in university dormitories or homestays, with host institutions renting classroom and housing facilities during the summer months. This model offers a structured academic experience while leaving room for personal and cultural exploration.

The second model, the study tour, typically spans seven to twenty-eight days and involves travel between cities—often by bus or train—with participants staying in hotels or similar accommodations. While it resembles group travel, the itinerary is

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