

# The Ethnography of Study Abroad: What is Study Abroad as a Cultural Event?

Federica Goldoni  
University of Georgia. USA  
[goldoni@uga.edu](mailto:goldoni@uga.edu)

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## Resumen/ Abstract

Recent research in the field of study abroad shows that study abroad participation among all U.S. students increased 20% since 2001 and nearly 200,000 U.S. students currently go abroad each year. Additionally, about 8% of all undergraduate degree recipients receive part of their education abroad.

Although quantitative studies have dominated research on study abroad, my research project calls for a qualitative approach since the goal is to understand what study abroad is as a cultural event, what authentic cultural immersion is, how program stakeholders understand and perceive cultural immersion, and how cultural immersion in programs can be improved.

Following the tradition of ethnographic and case study approaches in study abroad research, my study also pivots on ethnography. As an ethnographer I collected data mainly through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The study abroad participants were a group of undergraduate native speakers of English studying Spanish for seven weeks in Cádiz, a small coastal city in southern Spain, as well as program coordinators, host community members, and professors.

I also examined the specific program design features, particularly the in-class and out-of-class activities that students participated in. The goal was to understand if these features were conducive to authentic immersion in the language and culture. Eventually, I elaborated an ethnographic evaluation of the study abroad program and its design features suggesting improvements in order to enhance the significance and value of study abroad as a cultural event. Among other things, I discussed the difficulties that students had at the beginning of their sojourn to understand local people, get used to their host families' small apartments, get adjusted to new schedules and eating habits, and venture out from the main group to individually explore the new social and cultural fabric and interact with the host community.

The program evaluation revealed the need for carefully-designed pre-departure preparation sessions, pre-departure credit-bearing courses in intercultural communication, and additional language practice abroad and opportunities to come in contact with the local community through internships, volunteer or field work.

My study gives an important contribution in study abroad research and education. It benefits students, teachers, and study abroad directors and coordinators in suggesting ideas on how to improve the program and optimize the students' cultural experiences abroad. This study is also important because it investigated how US undergraduate learners studying the Spanish language and culture approach and perceive the study abroad experience in Spain.

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**Palabras clave / Keywords:** ethnography, study abroad, education

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Recent research in the field of study abroad (Rubin & Sutton, 2007) shows that study abroad participation among all U.S. students increased 20% since 2001 and nearly 200,000 U.S. students currently go abroad each year. Additionally, about 8% of all undergraduate degree recipients receive part of their education abroad.

Prior foreign language study abroad research has indicated that studying abroad is more beneficial than studying domestically in developing specific language skills such as oral proficiency and conversational competence (Brecht, Davinson, & Ginsberg, 1991; 1995; Freed, 1995; Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004; Lafford, 1995), as well as pragmatic use of language (Barron, 2003). A few studies have investigated the impact of duration of stay (Allen & Herron, 2003; Coleman, 1996), whereas other researchers have analyzed the student language support for study abroad (Ife, 2000; Pellegrino, 1998).

While quantitative studies have dominated research on study abroad (Adams, 2006; Allen & Herron, 2003; Brecht, Davinson, & Ginsberg 1991; 1995; Coleman, 1996; Collentine, 2004; Dewey, 2004; Díaz-Campos, 2004; Freed, 1995; Freed, Segalowitz, and Dewey, 2004; Guntermann, 1995; Lafford, 1995; Marriott, 1995), the research project described in this paper calls for a qualitative approach since the goal is to understand what study abroad is as a cultural event, what authentic cultural immersion is, how program stakeholders understand and perceive cultural immersion, and how cultural immersion in programs can be improved.

Following the tradition of ethnographic and case study approaches in study abroad research (Brecht and Robinson, 1993; Burnett & Gardner, 2006; Churchill, 2006; Fitch and Hooper, 1983; Jackson, 2006; Norton, 2000; Siegal, 1995; Wilkinson 1998a; 1998b; 2000), my study also pivots on ethnography. This process-oriented approach is particularly useful to analyze the participants' process of language and cultural immersion, capture the view about their goals and experiences, monitor changes in the sojourners, and also ascertain how the design and the delivery of the program can be improved.

In practice, the combination of ethnography and process evaluation in this project translates into an "emphasis on developing adequate rapport with the programme participants, the descriptive emphasis of data-collection and interpretation, and the focus of fieldworkers on understanding what the programme meant to the participants" (Knapp, 1999, p. 172). Therefore, my work involves intensive, naturalistic research on site, a reliance on ethnographic data collection and data analysis methods, and finally the evaluative report privileging a detailed narrative account over statistical analysis.

## Introduction and research questions

This paper will report on an ethnographic study which investigates how program stakeholders understand and perceive cultural immersion in a short-term study and residence in Spain. I will first outline the various program components, the context, and the findings of the study. In the second part I will discuss specific aspects of the program that could be refined and improved in order to maximize the process of students' cultural immersion in a study abroad program.

My study will address the following questions:

1. What is study abroad as a cultural event?
  - a. How do students, teachers, and program coordinators understand and perceive cultural immersion?
  - b. How might we improve cultural immersion in programs?

## Program components

### *Research site*

The study abroad program where I started my research is directed by the Department of Romance Languages at the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia (USA). The research site is Cádiz, a small coastal city in southern Spain in the region of Andalucía. The program is designed for intermediate/advanced adult English-speaking students who study Spanish and live with local families. The semester in Cádiz lasted seven weeks, from May 13<sup>th</sup> to June 29<sup>th</sup> 2007. I have chosen this program as my research site because in January 2007 I was offered by Dr. Elisabeth Wright, the director of the Romance Language Study Abroad Committee, to work as assistant, tutor, and mentor in Cádiz. Being in contact with the students, faculty, and host families, and having direct access to the program's administrative documents, evaluations, and academic material facilitates my process of data collection and data analysis.

Students live in pairs and eat their meals with Spanish families in Cádiz. Students take two of the four intermediate/advanced courses in Spanish offered in the summer. Courses in Cádiz are taught by experienced faculty from Spanish Universities. Some of the planned excursions from Cádiz are to Madrid, Toledo, Granada, and Seville.

### *Participants*

*Students.* Student participants consisted of male and female intermediate/advanced adult English-speaking students of Spanish enrolled in the study abroad programs in Cádiz, Spain directed by the Department of Romance Language at the University of Georgia in the summer of 2007. The number of students enrolled in the programs was 44 adults (32 women and 12 men) with an average age of 20 years old. Most of them grew up in Atlanta and its suburban area, and were undergraduate students of the University of Georgia.

Out of this group, eight case study students were selected (three men and five women) based on their willingness to participate in the project, their previous (inter)national background and experiences, and because they were representative of the program participants in terms of gender and age. Three of the case study girls never had



had any previous experience outside of the United States, even though they had been in contact with another culture and people due to the growing immigrant Latino population in the state of Georgia, USA. The rest of the case study students had traveled to Europe and around the world at least once, for one week in high school, or on vacation with their friends and/or parents.

*Program coordinators, professors, and host families.* Three instructors (two male tenure-track professors from the University of Cádiz and one female doctoral student from the Language and Literature Department at the University of Madrid) were teaching the six courses mentioned above, and were interviewed and observed while they were teaching their daily classes.

Two local program coordinators were interviewed. They worked for the San Fernando Institute, the institute where classes were taught and some of the afternoon activities were offered. They were mainly responsible for the logistics and well development of the program, as well as for organizing cultural activities such as excursions to nearby cities, flamenco and salsa classes, local food/wine tasting, and cooking classes.

Three additional program coordinators (including me, the researcher) from the University of Georgia worked for the study abroad program. I interviewed my two colleagues. We were responsible for organizing the weekend field trips, the students' physical and emotional health, sport games, tutoring sessions, visits to culturally and historically important sites, museums and buildings of interest, as well as movie screening sessions.

Finally, 22 host mothers from Cádiz of around 50/60 years of age were informally interviewed at their place about their experience and relationships with, as well as issues related to, the two American students living at their house during the program.

### ***Data Collection***

I collected data mainly through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, photography, and document analysis. I collected field notes of classes, home life, field trips, and certain excursions, as well as other curricular and extracurricular activities such as sport games and competitions, scavenger hunt, food tasting, movie watching, dance classes, and tutoring. I visited students' classes during selected activities, I talked to and interviewed host parents and professors, program's coordinators, and case study students. I photographed students in public places in order to capture their level of immersion within the host environment and interaction with native speakers of Spanish, and the level of participation in curricular and extracurricular activities and/or volunteer work. Eventually, I analyzed academic material (syllabi, exams, textbooks, course material, students' evaluations, the program's daily journal and activity plan), as well as students' artifacts produced during the semester abroad (specifically exams and compositions).

Besides collecting and analyzing data from the main stakeholders, I also examined the specific program design features, particularly the in-class and out-of-class activities that students participated in. The goal was to understand if these features were conducive to full and valuable immersion in the language and culture. Eventually, I elaborated an ethnographic evaluation of the study abroad program and its design

features suggesting improvements in order to enhance the significance and value of study abroad as a cultural event.

## Findings

### *At the beginning of the program*

Most participants started off with the best intentions. They expressed their aspirations to learn more about the people and the culture from Spain, widen their horizon, meet new people, and interact with foreigners abroad. When they were asked why they chose the study abroad program in Cádiz over the two other programs that the University of Georgia offers in Spain in the cities of Seville and Valencia, their answers widely varied. Some students said that the two other programs were full or did not offer the classes they needed/wanted to take. Others said that it was because of the beach in Cádiz, the small size of the town, and the homestay option with local families.

Students also discussed their initial difficulties to understand local people from Cádiz at home, in the street, in the stores, and in public places (mostly bars, discos, and restaurants). They had a hard time to get used to the small apartments where their host families used to live, and share the only bathroom with the rest of the family. Some of the students admitted that it was tough at the beginning to cope with the lack of privacy, being around people all the time, and having to wait for their turn to use the bathroom.

Another aspect of the experience abroad that cost some effort at start was to get adjusted to new schedules and eating habits. For example, lunch was served at around 2.30-3.00pm and dinner at 10.00am-10.30pm while students would get hungry much earlier than that. In terms of meals and food, the two most frequent complaints heard from the students were related to fried food being served on a regular basis, fish being served with “mustaches” and “bones” (including “baby sharks”, or *cazón* as it is called in Spanish), and not enough fresh vegetables. Some of them said they missed peanut butter, chicken, and Mexican food from their own home country. In terms of living habits, other comments and complaints were expressed about how dirty the streets and the sea were, how noisy people were in the plaza and streets until late at night, and about smoking in public places, buses, and at home.

At school students had cope with the fact that the internet connection was not working fine all the time, computers were old, the number of machines available for the students was limited, which often caused lines during breaks between classes, and the hours when the computer lab was open were restricted to mornings and afternoons. Students soon realized that the internet and credit cards were not nearly as widely used in Spain as in the United States to plan trips, to make hotel reservations, to reserve seats in the bus, or to purchase train tickets. This caused some frustration and logistical problems when it was time to plan trips during the free weekends that students had in the semester to travel by themselves and explore Spain on their own.

### ***The sojourn experience***

The students' major problems and complaints that emerged at the beginning gradually disappeared thanks to the good level of adaptation of the students themselves and the intervention of the program coordinators in collaboration with the host families. Little by little students got used to the way of speaking and living of the local people, the house size, the food, and the schedule.

The 44 students seemed to like each other very much and they spent a lot of their free time all together. As a group they would go to the beach, meet in Plaza Mina (one of the most popular squares where young people would hang out), go to the restaurants, bars and discos together, and organize weekend trips as a group to the coastal cities of Marbella and Gibraltar (Spain), and to Lagos (Portugal). By the end of the program eight students from the group between boys and girls were unofficially dating. This strong group cohesion contributed to a growing feeling of solidarity, reciprocal help, and companionship among all the US students. Male students would watch over and escort female students home, especially after seven girls had been victims of separate episodes of harassment in the street and at the beach by local adolescents and young men, episodes that were unprecedented in the relatively quiet town of Cádiz. At the same time group solidarity made it difficult for individual students to become more independent, venture out from the main group, and separately explore the local social and cultural fabric, and interact with the host community members.

The group did not blend into the local community and it was easy to spot it around town. The language spoken within the group was mainly English, although some students would mix in some Spanish words. Most of them were eager to hear and practice more Spanish, especially during field trips and guided visits to museums, cities, and archeological sites when they preferred to hear the guide's explanations in Spanish instead of English. Even during my interviews with case study students, they chose to speak Spanish. After all, living and interacting with local families remained the most intense and authentic cultural and linguistic experience of the students, even though this contact was often limited to meal times. Therefore, several students expressed their desire to speak more Spanish with local people, their family, and in public places.

By the end of the program it was clear that the students had not gained much independence from the main group, especially when it came down to solving problems by themselves, making telephone calls, and talking to local people. For example, one student forgot her passport in the hotel during a weekend field trip. She called the hotel in order to recuperate it. After a couple of unsuccessful attempts to clearly communicate with the staff of the hotel, the student requested help from the program coordinators to make the telephone call for her and finally resolve the issue. A similar situation happened to three other students: one lost his credit card, another lost a personal item, and a third one developed an allergic reaction to a medicine and had to call the local doctor who prescribed the medicine to her. They all did not feel comfortable or self-confident enough to solve the problem by themselves and finally asked for assistance.



### ***One isolated case***

One girl out of the whole group started to date a Spanish young man she met in Cádiz. It seems to me that she was the only student who actually established a strong connection and relationship with an individual (her boyfriend) who did not belong to the program. From the very beginning of the program the girl showed herself to be reserved, shy, extremely focused, determined, and eager to learn Spanish inside and outside of the classroom. At start she would participate in all optional activities planned in the afternoons and during weekends - sometimes she would be the only one showing up, together with other two or three students. The beach was a much popular place for the rest of the group where to spend afternoons. During the breaks between one class and the next she stayed in class and read a book instead of going out, and socialize with her classmates. She almost did not fit in the group for her being so intellectual and serious. After she started to date a Spanish young man, she gained much independence. She did not show up as usual for the optional afternoon activities, and she was often seen around town and at the beach with her new boyfriend. One of her professors noticed a positive change in her attitude as well: she appeared much less stressed out, obsessed, and compulsive about her learning process, performance, and grades in the class. She became more relaxed, pleasant to hang out with, and happier looking. Her physical appearance and way of dressing also changed. She obviously shopped for local clothes, jewelry, and shoes, and she took care of details such as her hair and physical appearance in a more apparent way than before.

### ***The perspective of the case study students***

The eight case study students I interviewed said that the main source of cultural and linguistic immersion they were exposed to was the interaction with their host family, walking in the street and going to the plaza, and the field trips. Overall the seven-week program in Spain increased their confidence, self-esteem, and independence to travel, experience new things, meet new people, and speak the language. It helped them mature a feeling of appreciation for their own culture and a better understanding of the value and importance of many little things they have back at home that they take for granted, and the value of traveling and seeing the world. The experience abroad taught them how to deal with situations they are not used to, to be patient and tolerant, and to accept differences.

It seemed that the main issue here was not *Culture* but rather a much more quotidienne notion of *culture*, that is dealing with minor inconveniences and differences that seem to occupied students on a daily basis. When I asked my case study students if there was something that they would remember forever, they thought of their local professors, host families, the food, the art and the architecture. They commented on how useful their class “Introduction to Spanish linguistics” was. It helped them realize and correct the major pronunciation errors that they were unconsciously making because of the influence of their native language on Spanish. They will also remember the several cases of public demonstration of affection they witnessed and the topless women at the beach.

Besides their positive memories and outcomes, case study students also directed my attention to a few experiences that they found disappointing and unnecessary. First, they brought up the issue if the seven girls of the group that got harassed and for whom everybody felt much solidarity and sorrow, especially male students who watched over



their female friends and started to escort them everywhere. Second, the case study students talked about how rude, arrogant, and unprofessional certain store clerks and/or waiters were with them when they were shopping or waiting to be seated in a restaurant. They felt they had been ignored or treated with little patience and professionalism for being Americans or just foreigners. Additionally, it was disappointing for them to notice that in big cities such as Madrid, Toledo, and Seville local people would reply in English when American students tried to address them in Spanish. Finally, what became very irritating to the staff and most students were the continual complaints of certain students from the group who were annoyed by things that they did not like, that did not work, and that they missed from the United States, such as computers and the internet that were not available, their small bed and only one bathroom to share, and the food. It was easy for all the students being together all the time to amplify these aspects and to validate problems and complaints. But people's complaints did not find fertile ground all the time. For example, one student in particular gained the reputation of being obnoxious among her fellow students for her continual complains that the group defined exaggerated and excessive. She would complain aloud about the fact that the bus that took the group on the various excursions had to stop by law every three hours in a rest area, that it was forbidden to eat, drink or stand in the bus, and that she could have slept longer if they had not had to leave so early in the morning.

Finally, while some of the case study students said that they would gradually go back to the same routine, schedule, and life style in the United States, others pointed out that those seven weeks spent abroad had changed them a little. They were determined to speak and take more Spanish at home, they wanted to find the time to prepare different kinds of dishes using fresh ingredients and olive oil, and they wanted to eat dinner much later than they used to before Spain. Spending more time in the street and in the plaza and slowing down the pace like Spaniards do was something else that they were planning to incorporate in their everyday life back in the United States.

### ***The perspective of the professors, coordinators, and host families***

For professors, coordinators, and host families the programs' goals for student learning about and experiencing Spanish culture and society were to improve their language skills while being exposed to, recognizing, and understanding different products, perspectives, and practices that are typical of Spain and Spaniards as opposed to the United States. The aspects of the program that addressed these goals were first the homestay with local families (including the related activities that each family planned based on the interest of the individual students, such as theatre going, birthdays parties, dinner with the whole family, and participation in other sport, family, or religious celebrations), and then the wide range of cultural and social activities organized during the semester by the program coordinators and professors to expand on the academic components viewed in class and connect those with real life.

The class activities and components that the professors perceived as the most successful among the students for their strong participation and enthusiasm were Spanish music, interacting pair and group exercises, activities where students had to go out and explore the city, interview and interact with locals. Some examples were the street interview on means of communication that students conducted, and a scavenger hunt. The three professors pointed out that their goal was for their students to have a sense of their linguistic and academic improvement and progress from the beginning to the end of the course while having fun in class. The metaphor that one professor used to

describe his goal was related to soccer. Like in soccer it is important for the whole team to play well just as much as to win in order to feel satisfaction. If the team plays well but loses, or if the team wins but doesn't play well, the players end up being unsatisfied and disappointed. The same happens in class. If students learn a lot but the class is boring, or vice versa if students have fun in class but don't learn anything, they won't be happy. Therefore, it is a matter of finding a good combination and balance between learning and having a good time all together.

The out-of-class activities that the coordinators perceived as the most successful among the students were group dinners at local restaurants, wine production and tasting in a nearby wine factory, hand-made ice cream production and tasting in a local *heladería*, indoor soccer, and guided field trips to see the Alhambra<sup>1</sup> and the flamenco show in Granada, the cathedral of Seville (as well as the bull fight and soccer game that some students went seeing by themselves), the museums in Madrid, and Toledo.

There are aspects of the Spanish culture and society that students seemed to have a hard time grasping: the phenomenon of young people living with their parents at the age of 30 and over, the local diet rich on olive oil and fried food that most students considered unhealthy, the fact that there is no drinking age and people can hold the bottle and drink from it in the street, and common rules such as no food or drink in the bus. Additionally, students had trouble with understanding the variety of Spanish spoken locally, although they gradually got used to interacting with their host families.

As a result of the trouble experienced by the students in interactions locally, and the strong cohesion of the group of 44 American students, what failed to happen during the seven weeks of the program was a deeper cultural integration of the students into the social fabric of Cádiz. The only people the students interacted with on a regular basis were the program participants (professors, coordinators, host families and their relatives). Hardly anybody cultivated any important friendship or relationship outside of the program participants, except for the girl who started to date a Spanish young man.

Finally, one of the program coordinators perceived that female students somehow differed from their male friends in their experiences with Spanish culture and society. Female students were the ones who repeatedly complained about the noise in the street and plaza until late at night, host parents smoking in the house or the bus driver lighting a cigarette in the bus, and the food served at home. They said that there was much fried food that would make them gain weight, the fish was served with head and bones - which they found gross, there was not enough variety of fruit and vegetables besides lettuce and tomatoes in the salads, oranges and watermelon. Oddly enough, the host mothers that I interviewed said that their two girls used to eat everything they cooked, they found it very good and tasty, they never complained about food, and never requested extra food that they liked better and that was not regularly served at home. When I went back and asked the girls why they did not negotiate the food that they preferred with the host family, they replied that they did not want to sound rude or offend their host mothers. One host mother in particular told me that since they switched her from hosting female students to boys, she was happier. She said that boys are easier to please, they are less picky about food, they eat pretty much everything, they hardly have any weight- or diet-related problem, they are talkative and clean, and they also interact a great deal with her husband about topics such as sport, particularly soccer, and ask questions related to daily homework. Finally, seven girls

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<sup>1</sup> Residence of the sultan and headquarters of the Arabic empire in Spain for 800 years, from 1238 to 1492.

were harassed by local adolescents and young men, and another female student was forbidden by the owner of the internet café to use the computers there – computers to which each student had a pre-paid pass - because of an insignificant argument they had on the prince of a printed page she sent to the printer. These episodes that affected several female girls of the group could be just a coincidence, a result of the fact that women were more numerous than male students, or a consequences of the presence in the group of female students that Spaniards would probably call *pijas* (rich, snobby, spoiled girls). However, some of these episodes could also be perceived as a manifestation of the macho culture in Spain that still now is considered as a serious social problem that causes several victims among local inhabitants as well. One thing is for sure: these episodes affected the way female students of the group perceived and understood the Spanish culture and people as opposed to male students.

### **The program evaluation**

In this section I will first classify the study abroad program in Cádiz based on the taxonomy designed by Engle and Engle (2003; 2004). Then, I will discuss specific aspects of the ‘French Practicum’ study abroad program by Engle and Engle (1999) that could be incorporated into the program in Cádiz in order to maximize the process of students’ cultural immersion. Finally, I will evaluate the program in Cádiz based on the IES<sup>2</sup> guidelines (2007).

#### ***The Engle and Engle taxonomy***

Based on the classification system of program types designed by Engle and Engle (2003; 2004), the University of Georgia study abroad program in Cádiz is considered to be a short-term program that holds elements from level-2 to level-4 programs:

- Level-2 elements: duration from 3 to 8 weeks; academic work organized for the student group in a foreign language institute; collective home stay; orientation sessions to handle logistical considerations and provide cultural do’s and don’ts.
- Level-3 elements: intermediate (level 3) and pre-advanced (level 4) entry-target language competence; none or limited provision for cultural interaction and experiential learning such as community service, personal interest activity; language exchange with local students.
- Level-4 elements: predominantly Spanish as language used in course work and field trips.

#### ***The ‘French Practicum’***

Engle and Engle (1999) from the American University Center of Provence propose a study abroad program called ‘French Practicum’ that is classified as a level-5 cross-cultural immersion program and that could be seen as a reference point for other study abroad programs. In it all participants engage in the following activities for successful cultural integration within the host community and with native speakers:

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<sup>2</sup> Institute for the International Education of Students

1) Linguistic component: at least two hours weekly of linguistic exchange with a French learner of English (one hour French, one hour English).

2) Personal interest component: pursuit of a personal interest or hobby through enrollment, membership, and/or regular participation in a club, organization, team, or lesson (guitar courses, cooking lessons, dance classes, chess club, bike club...).

3) Community service component: at least two hours weekly of local volunteer work.

4) Mentoring or guided cultural reflection: two hour classroom session of continuing term-long cultural orientation whose goal is to enrich and extend authentic cultural experience through reflection, analysis, personal articulation, and practical advice. This regular debriefing session encourages overall intellectual development via written and in-class analysis and frequent feedback.

It is important to understand that 'French Practicum' is offered for a full semester/academic year program to a limited number of advanced students (25-35 students) in French from differing home universities with which credit transfer is arranged directly. All participants take French Practicum within a course load of an average of four other courses organized on-site as well as one course by direct enrolment at the French university. Additionally, all students are housed in single-student homestays with French families. Although the components of the 'French Practicum' are designed for a small size program, they are interesting elements that could be added to the study abroad in Cádiz. However, it might be difficult to find 35 families from Cádiz for individual homestay, as well as community service opportunities for students considering the small size of the city.

The importance of ensuring that a particular program's component is effective in enhancing student learning was a topic discussed during a session on "Qualitative Research", where Lilli Engle, co-founder and director of the American University Center of Provence, described her research on gains associated with adjusting the components of her own program. She described observing that students who traveled on group flights tended to stay in a pack with other program participants. After rearranging the program design so that students traveled individually and were met at the airport by their host families, she found that they were more able and willing to experience the culture on their own - one of her goals for them.

### ***The IES evaluation guidelines***

The International Education of Students (2007) proposes guidelines for evaluating study abroad programs focusing on four academic areas listed in the IES MAP<sup>3</sup>:

1. The student's learning environment
2. Student learning and the development of intercultural competence
3. Resource for academic and student support
4. Program administration and development

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<sup>3</sup> Model Assessment Practice, an innovative educational tool for planning and evaluating study abroad programs



In the IES MAP they claim that “these guidelines reflect current best practices in U.S. higher education that likewise are common to university settings in many other countries” (p. 7).

Crucial components of study abroad programs that emerge in the IES MAP, and that can be incorporated in the UGA study abroad program in Cádiz, are the strong emphasis on internships, as well as field study/placement, volunteer work, workshops, and regular access to computers and the internet, local educational and cultural institutions, agencies, research centers and facilities such as libraries, special collections, specific database, audio-visual material, and digital resources. The IES Academic Council considers these to be essential elements that facilitate life long-learning, support students’ immersion in the host culture, and help students develop intercultural, interpersonal, and cognitive skills. Despite the small size of Cádiz and the short-term program (seven weeks), efforts should be focused in this direction. Otherwise the risk is that the beach in Cádiz remains one of the main reasons why students chose Cádiz over other programs in Spain, and the place where students prefer to spend most of their afternoons.

The IES MAP also highlights the importance of three other aspects in a study abroad program that could be added to Cádiz:

- a. student learning environment:
  - the importance of providing re-entry programs to students about possible difficulties and learning opportunities related to the re-adjustment to their home culture;
  - the importance of providing the opportunity to reflect and share the cognitive and intrapersonal aspects of their experiences abroad;
- b. students assessment and intercultural development:
  - the importance of routinely gathering students’ reports on their experiences, interactions, ability to adapt, and on what and how they have learnt in and about the host culture and people as part of the general program evaluation;
  - the importance of systematically assessing students’ cultural and linguistic learning that is used to enhance the curriculum, students’ services, and integrative activities;
- c. resources for academic and students’ support:
  - the importance of training staff and TAs to become knowledgeable mentors and guides about the city that hosts the program, the sites and places that the program visits during the semester abroad, the country, and the local culture;

## **Results and conclusions**

My study aimed to answer the following question and sub questions:

1. What is study abroad as a cultural event?
  - a. How do students, teachers, and program coordinators understand and perceive cultural immersion?
  - b. How might we improve cultural immersion in programs?

Students, teachers, and coordinators of the study abroad program in Cádiz seem to understand cultural immersion as a series of cultural, social, and sportive events organized for the students to allow them to see and experience how things are in another part of the world, and understand that any difference students may notice is never good or bad, right or wrong, and never by chance. Instead, it is the result of years of history and civilizations that indelibly forged the culture and society of that particular region of Spain.

The program evaluation that I elaborated reveals the need for carefully-designed pre-departure credit-bearing courses in intercultural communication that prepare students to live in Spain, extensive language practice abroad, opportunities to come in contact with the local community through internships, volunteer or field work, as well as chances to reflect and analyze these experiences in order to make them more meaningful, facilitate life long-learning, support students' immersion, and help them develop intercultural, interpersonal, and cognitive skills.

One immediate measure that can be taken to refine the current University of Georgia curriculum for the Spanish language would be to incorporate two components:

- a) Reading (and discussion) of the *Students' Guide*, *professionals' Guide*, and *Instructors' Guide on Maximizing Study Abroad Through Language and Culture Strategies* designed by Paige, Cohen, Kappler, Chi, and Lassegard (2002) and available on the CARLA website of the University of Minnesota at <http://www.carla.umn.edu/maxsa/guides.html>.
- b) Regular email correspondence with a pen pal from Cádiz.

The three guides on maximizing study abroad through language and culture strategies are designed to enhance study abroad students' language competence and intercultural communication skills. The *Students' Guide* provides study abroad students with practical information regarding strategies that they can use to optimize their language and cultural learning opportunities. It can be used as a self-study manual with little or no external facilitation, or it can be adopted as course text for highly-facilitated pre-departure, on-site, and reentry courses. The *Professionals' and Language Instructors' Guides* are similar to the *Students' Guide* but they contain additional information on how to facilitate activities for the students, and how to teach strategies for language and culture learning in the classroom.

Regular email correspondence with a pen pal from Cádiz requires for the study abroad staff to establish contacts with professors of English from the University of Cádiz who are interested in developing a linguistic exchange that enables their Spanish students to practice English through chat rooms or emails with American students of Spanish from the University of Georgia. If students started to correspond with their pen pals overseas a few months before going abroad, they could highly benefit from it once they arrive in Cádiz. This initiative would translate into extensive language practice and opportunities for the US students to independently explore the host culture and people with the help of their local friend and his/her network of friendships and connections.

The nature and degree of students' cultural immersion depends upon staff and specific program design features but also upon individuals' personality traits and attributes. It can vary a lot based on how open and motivated learners are to take their



chances and explore the target culture and language by themselves and in group, access the socio-cultural fabric and networks, and establish human relationships with the native speakers of the host country. Students in Cádiz showed themselves not always ready and willing to open themselves to all aspects of the cultural and linguistic experiences. At times it seemed that they expected Spain to be similar to the United States and to find in it more aspects of American-style life. Inevitably some of them got disappointed and frustrated, but it is up to them to gradually recognize and accept all cultural challenges and grow with. Below is what Engle and Engle claim (2003) that claim about study abroad:

... [it is not about] providing immediate comfort and services to clients, safe and familiar cultural bubbles, moving bodies around geographically, simple changes of scenery. It is about recognizing the challenge that true involvement in an unfamiliar world represents, and choosing the hard, progressive road to understanding what Hall calls the 'inherent logic' of a foreign culture. Recognizing this logic as it unfolds is the heart of cross-cultural understanding and respect. (p. 19)

In conclusion, this study gives a small but significant contribution in study abroad research and education. It benefits students, teachers, and study abroad directors and coordinators for the specific program in Cádiz, but it also suggests general ideas on how to improve other programs in order to optimize the students' cultural experiences abroad. This study also provides an important example of how US undergraduate learners studying the Spanish language and culture approach and perceive the summer study abroad experience.

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