

Students who study abroad are more civically engaged

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Credit: Yan Krukau from Pexels

After a few months in a different country, you may pick up a new phrase or favorite dish, but can studying abroad change how you participate in society? A recent study published in the *Journal of Moral Education*

found that students who study abroad are more civically engaged than those who don't.

Though formal classroom learning is an essential part of higher education, researchers at UChicago recognized that college is about more than what goes on in the lecture hall. "It's interesting to think about ways in which [students'](#) college experiences outside the classroom prepare them for the world out there," said Anne Henly, director of Undergraduate Studies in Psychology and principal investigator of the study.

What impact do "co-curricular activities," like joining a club or playing a sport, have on a [student's](#) psychological development? As part of a grant awarded by the Self, Virtue and Public Life Initiative, the Center for Practical Wisdom's Jeannie Ngoc Boulware, Yena Kim, Howard Nusbaum and Anne Henly conducted a study focused on one specific co-curricular activity—studying abroad.

Though programs differ in location and level of immersion, students traveling overseas usually find themselves navigating different socio-[cultural norms](#). Being in a new place allows students to acquire [language skills](#), meet new people from other cultures and encounter different ideas.

"Our hypothesis was that because study abroad removes you from what you're familiar with and introduces you to ways in which other people live, that might encourage you to see things from their perspective," Henly said. "This might change basic perspective-taking abilities and empathic processes that affect [social attitudes](#) and engagement."

To test this theory, researchers surveyed nearly 200 UChicago students: those who had studied abroad, those hadn't studied abroad but planned to and students who weren't interested in studying abroad.

Participants in each group completed several scales that measured not only civic attitudes and behaviors, but also psychological qualities that support those behaviors, such as empathy, epistemic humility and cultural competency.

All groups scored similarly on the "Need for Cognition" scale, which measures enjoyment of thinking. In fact, apart from a difference in overall cultural competency, students who planned to study abroad and students who weren't planning to were not fundamentally different.

Likewise, civic attitudes were high for all groups—most people believe they should participate in their community. However, students who had studied abroad were more likely to act on those beliefs—for example actually taking a volunteer position instead of simply believing volunteering is important.

"Those students who go abroad report more often actually taking the actions to participate as opposed to just believing that they should participate," said Jeannie Ngoc Boulware, first author and assistant director of Communications & Research for the Center for Practical Wisdom.

In addition, students who had studied abroad showed higher levels of empathy for others and greater epistemic humility, meaning they were more aware of the limits of their own knowledge. The researchers hypothesize that living abroad may alter one's sense of self in relation to others in a way that spurs civic engagement. They plan to investigate further by tracking students' [civic engagement](#) before and after they go abroad. The Center also plans to dig into other co-curricular activities and how they affect student development.

"If you get out of your typical experiences, force yourself to be a little bit uncomfortable and just have a little bit of perspective change, that

can greatly benefit who you are as a member of society," Boulware said. "We have this tendency to be in this echo chamber in our lives; to be able to step outside of that can really benefit us."

More information: Jeannie Ngoc Boulware et al, Stranger in a strange land: The role of study abroad in civic virtues, *Journal of Moral Education* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/03057240.2022.2139668](https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2022.2139668)

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