Trans-Atlantic Masters Program: Crossing Global and Disciplinary Boundaries

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Disappearing disciplinary borders in the social science library - global studies or sea change?

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Abstract

In response to accelerated globalization and the complex issues facing our nations,

colleges and universities in the U.S. are taking a more international and interdisciplinary

approach to their educational programming. More interdisciplinary degree programs,

along with expanded study abroad options, are increasingly common. These new

curricular offerings often require rigorous coursework in the social sciences coupled with

study in one or more foreign countries. In order for academic libraries to fully support

students in these programs, more must be known about the barriers and opportunities

that students face when conducting interdisciplinary research while abroad. This paper

describes the results of a study of the University of North Carolina's Trans-Atlantic

Masters Program. Interviews with key stakeholders, student surveys and analysis of

course syllabi helped to assess the information needs of students and to identify ways

the library could better support the goals of the program. A framework for library support

is proposed to address these needs.

Keywords

Interdisciplinary research, Study abroad, Graduate college students, University library

services, University library collections, Library administration

1.0 Introduction

In their May 2007 white paper, the Institute for International Education reported a steady

increase in the number of students studying abroad and a dramatic increase in the

number of study abroad programs supported across U.S. campuses (Obst, Bhandari,

and Witherell, 2007). In September of 2007, the National Institutes of Health (NIH)

announced that they were awarding $210-million in grants meant to foster

interdisciplinary research, in a move that officials say represents a "fundamental

change" in the agency's research culture (Petrie, 2007). In November of the same year,

the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded the University of Minnesota Press and one

of the University's research institutes a grant of $672,000 for a new program dedicated

to interdisciplinary research and publication (Howard, 2007). These are just a few

examples of how those in higher education are reallocating resources to support

research and education that is both international and interdisciplinary.

Despite the impressive advances many academic libraries have made in response to

the growing needs and expectations of 21st Century students and faculty, many

continue to focus their resources and services on traditional campus-based and

discipline-specific programs. Even those that provide significant support for their

institution's distance education program, falter when they hit the borders of the

continental U.S. The assumption underlying our research is that there is more academic

libraries can and should do to support students in interdisciplinary programs, especially

those that involve study in a foreign country; yet not enough is known about the nature

of these programs or the challenges students face in finding the information they need.

To begin to address this need locally, a study of the Trans-Atlantic Masters (TAM)

program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) was conducted in the

spring of 2008. The researchers interviewed a handful of key stakeholders, surveyed

both current students and recent graduates of the program, and analyzed a sample of

the syllabi for courses offered in the U.S. and at foreign universities involved in the

program. The study was designed to understand the extent of the program's

"interdisciplinarity" and the faculty's expectations for research. The study also looked at

the information-seeking strategies students use and the difficulties they encounter when

completing their assignments and conducting research while abroad.

2.0 The UNC-Chapel Hill Trans-Atlantic Masters Program

The Trans-Atlantic Masters Program offers an ideal case for analysis. Offered by a

consortium of world-renowned universities in the United States and Europe (EAUC),

TAM is a unique, intensive fourteen-month degree program providing students with the

opportunity to pursue graduate study at a variety of locations on both sides of the

Atlantic while earning a masters degree. While offered through the Department of

Political Science at UNC, the program requires study in a wide range of social science

disciplines and students are encouraged to approach research assignments from social,

economic, political and environmental perspectives. TAM graduates often pursue

international careers in administration, diplomacy, business, policy-making, consulting,

teaching, and research. The academic year is divided into five intensive study modules.

After attending the core module and U.S. national module at the University of North

Carolina from August to December, students choose to attend one additional site or up

to a maximum of two additional universities in Europe to complete the remaining

modules. TAM represents a growing number of programs designed to educate global

leaders and offers new challenges to traditional library services.

3.0 Literature Review

Although academic librarians, especially those working in social science disciplines, are acutely aware of the trends in study abroad programming and interdisciplinary research in their institutions, there has been little systematic research done to help us understand what these changes to the curriculum mean for library services and resources.

3.1. Library Support for Study Abroad

The literature on library support for study abroad programs is limited. Brogan (1990) described new directions in international education during the past decade and linked them to new imperatives in academic librarianship. She identified 5 major areas of development including foreign language instruction, study abroad, internationalizing the curriculum, foreign students and scholars, and technical assistance and international development. Written in connection with the work of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) task force on international relations, the article recommended ways in which ACRL might strengthen its role as an advocate of international education. The same year, Popa and Lamprecht (1990) described the University of California's Education Abroad Program (UC-EAP). While effective use of information sources in host university libraries abroad is one of the contributing factors to academic success, the authors found EAP students had difficulty using foreign university libraries. They used a survey to assess students' expectations and the realities of the following: library hours, adequacy of buildings and equipment, stacks, collections, collection access, reference help, orientation tours and information brochures, and on-line access to remote data bases. The authors suggest providing pre-departure activities to minimize false expectations of foreign libraries.   Similarly,

after seeing firsthand the difficulty American students encountered using a university

library in Japan, Engeldinger (1985) outlined key questions academic libraries should

ask to familiarize themselves with the study abroad programs and the libraries in the

most popular study abroad destinations. These questions included: what are the

research and library project expectations of the faculty, what are the academic goals of

the program, how extensive are the English language holdings of the foreign libraries,

and how are the materials accessed? (Engeldinger, 1985, p. 397).

If one broadens the topic to include studies of library support for distance education, the

body of literature is more substantial. The most recent publications examine a wide

range of library services, from instruction and information literacy (Fang, 2006; Newton,

2007; and Webb, 2006) to library anxiety (Block, 2007) and interlibrary loan (Morris,

2007). A number of studies have also focused on the importance of the library's

presence and integration of resources and services into the institution's course

management system (Jackson, 2007; Pandya, 2007; and Scales, Wolf, & Johnson,

2007).   Another notable area of research for distance learners that is relevant to this

study is the importance of developing personalized research relationships through

consultation services (Lillard, 2004).

3.2. Library Support for Interdisciplinary Research

The research on interdisciplinary studies has identified many complexities that those

traversing disciplinary boundaries must contend with such as inadequate collections,

difficulty in navigating the vast amounts of information available, and the tensions they

face with conflicting vocabularies (Spanner, 2001). A review of the literature finds that

most studies focus on faculty researchers rather than students; and Westerbrook concluded that the services libraries provide to interdisciplinary scholars "build on a few finite research studies (such as examinations of subject headings) and praxis" (2003, 194).

Much of the literature on library support for interdisciplinary research focuses primarily on the challenges related to the development and evaluation of collections.   Dobson, Kushkowski and Gerhard (1996) present a model of interdisciplinary information that identifies the relationship between a core set of interdisciplinary materials, closely related materials, and related materials from the traditional discipline. Because traditional models of collection evaluation are inadequate to assess the quality of interdisciplinary collections, they offer a variety of methods, including subject analysis based on their model, user-centered assessment based on survey results, and access to materials based on local collections and interlibrary loan services.

Several studies have centered on specific fields considered interdisciplinary. Bartolo, Wicks, and Ott (2002) looked at the monographic approval plan and budget allocation established for the geography department at a large research university. They found that that periodic reviews of the approval profile and selections made by faculty representatives can help determine the level of interest in interdisciplinary fields and the where cooperative collection purchasing or resources sharing may be advantageous. Jacoby, Murray, Alterman, and Welbourne (2002) devised a methodology for developing and evaluating collections for the field of social work. They found that better communication between the library and the social work faculty was critical to ensure adequate access to information resources.

4.0 Methodology

This study consisted of three parts: 1) in-depth interviews with the program coordinator and faculty coordinator, 2) an analysis of a sampling of syllabi from the 2005-2008 course offerings and 3) a survey of students currently enrolled in the program, and recent graduates of the program.

4.1 Interviews

For the initial phase of this study, the researchers conducted in-depth interview with both the program coordinator and the faculty coordinator at UNC-Chapel Hill. A series of semi-structured open-ended questions were designed to elicit responses that would describe program processes and outcomes from the perspective of these two key stakeholders. The interviews were held in the office of the program coordinator and were informal and conversational. The session was recorded and both researchers took written notes to record any relevant non-verbal communication. Immediately following the interview, the researchers met and reflected on our own perception of the session.

4.2 Analysis of Course Syllabi

Researchers analyzed the content of the TAM course syllabi that were available on the Web from the previous three years. The researchers coded the types of research assignments required, the content areas covered, and the information resources required for each of the courses. A total of seventeen course syllabi from the U.S., Paris, Berlin, Bath, and Madrid were examined. The degree of information available

varied from syllabus to syllabus so each researcher coded the information separately then compared the results. Any difference in coding was discussed until parity was reached.

4.3 Student Surveys

Following the first two phases of the study, two web-based surveys were developed, one for recent graduates of the TAM program and one for students currently enrolled in the program and spending the semester at a European university. By surveying recent graduates, we hoped to learn what skills students felt was most useful in completing not only their course assignments, but all the program requirements including the master's thesis). We were also interested in learning whether their post-graduate careers required research skills. Similarly, by surveying current students, we hoped to discover their information skill needs. We intentionally surveyed current students while they were abroad so whatever barriers they may have encountered would be fresh in their minds.

While the researchers were interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the program from the students' perspective, none of the students were on the UNC campus or available for in-depth interviews or follow-up questions. Therefore, the researchers relied heavily on the findings from the interviews and the analysis of the syllabi to construct the survey questions. From both the interviews and the syllabi, it was evident that while the program was administered through UNC's Political Science Department, there was a high level of interdisciplinary in the expectations for student research and

the actual content of the classes. Through the survey, the researchers hoped to confirm

that impression. In addition to confirming the types of assignments students faced, the

researchers were interested to know where students turned for information, both at

home and while abroad, to complete their assignments.

Participants were contacted via email through program listservs. The email message

contained a link to the online questionnaire. The data was compiled by the survey

vendor, Survey Monkey (www.SurveyMonkey.com), and later analyzed by the

researchers.

5.0 Interview Findings

The interviews with the program and faculty coordinators revealed some interesting

perceptions and misperceptions of the library services and resources available to TAM

students, and of the graduate students' research skills. Both individuals were quick to

praise the efforts the library had made to orient students to the library before they left

UNC. However, they were quick to point out that their students relied more on journal

articles than books. As one interviewee commented "They [the students] do most of

their research over the internet and really don't use books when they're abroad. They

mostly use journals." Follow-up questioning made it clear that while they equated the

library with books, they did not necessarily equate the journal articles students were

accessing with the library. The comment reinforced the importance of educating

students and faculty on their ability to authenticate and access online journals through

the library.

There was also an assumption that students entered the TAM program with relatively high level research skills. On the program's interdisciplinarity, the interviewees both emphasized the political science and sociological nature of the program, but one interviewee did acknowledge that students were often encouraged and even required to crosses the boundaries of disciplines. The interviewees also spoke of the challenges students face when attempting to use libraries abroad. Closed stacks were a particular barrier for students.

5.1 Syllabi Analysis

The investigators examined the syllabi to identify the course content, and when possible the types of assignments students were required to complete. While most were identified as political science courses, subject areas covered areas included fields such as economics, history, philosophy, psychology, religion, gender studies, environmental studies, and languages.

More than half of the classes required some sort of research paper or presentation based on research. The majority of classes required papers ranging in length from 3,000-9,000 words. Paper type included: research-based, reaction papers, and case-studies.

Students were required to draw on a variety of information resources for many of the classes including books, journal articles, data sets, web sites, and working papers. The availability of required course readings was not apparent from the syllabi of classes conducted abroad.

5.2 Student and Graduate Survey Results

Surveys were sent to current students and the most recent graduates of the program.

The program accepts approximately 20 students each year so while the number of

surveys completed (14 current TAM students and 8 recent graduates of the TAM

program) was not large, the response rate was relatively high.

Current Students

Types of Assignments

Currents students indicated that the majority of their assignments fell into two

categories: argument papers about societal issues ranging in length from 4-6 pages,

and semester long projects. A few students also listed case studies and literature

reviews as frequent assignments.

Research Process

Students were asked about the steps they took when beginning their research. Forty-

three percent reported their first step in the research process was to visit the online

resources available through the UNC library Web site. Twenty-eight percent started with

a textbook or other reading from the class. One reported starting with an internet search

engine (such as Google or Yahoo, etc.) and one reported starting at an Academic

Library.

The second step in the process was split fairly evenly between: using a textbook or

other reading(s) from the class, using a search engine to find resources (e.g., Google,

Yahoo!), using the online resources available through the UNC Library Web site, visiting

an academic library, and talking to the professor who assigned the research paper. One

student reported consulting a UNC librarian at this point in the research process.

For the third step in the research process the students were split between: talking to the professor who assigned the research paper, using a search engine to find resources (e.g., Google, Yahoo!), and using the online resources available through the UNC Library Web site.

When the question was broadened to doing research abroad 43% again indicated that they started by using the online resources available through the UNC Library Web site. None said they consulted a UNC librarian first.

Forty-six percent of students indicated they spend more than 9 hours on average when researching and collecting resources for a research paper. Thirty-six percent indicated they spent 6-9 hours; and 36% indicated they spent more than 9 hours when writing and editing their research papers.

Forty-three percent chose "learning something new" as the one thing that mattered most when working on a research paper while 29% selected the grade the professor gave them as most important. No student selected "improving my research skills".

Information Sources

The vast majority of students cited journal articles (electronic and print) as the information sources they used most both for research in journal and when abroad. Interestingly, when the question was specified to research abroad, students indicated that they also used data sets, government documents, books, and newspapers, while for the general research question students selected only articles and books.

UNC Library Resources and Services

Students were asked several questions on a Likert scale about a variety of UNC Library resources. Fifty percent were neutral as to whether or not UNC librarians were helpful to them during the research process, while 50% percent agreed or strongly agreed that they were helpful. Seventy percent indicated that they found the orientation provided by the librarians to be useful and approximately 30% were neutral about the usefulness. Eighty percent agreed strongly that the online databases were useful, and the majority reported finding items on the library shelves to be useful.

When asked "Which of the following services would help you with your research?", 67% indicated that consulting with a subject expert would be helpful, 58% selected "assistance in accessing information when studying abroad", and 50% "instruction in finding specific types of information (online or face-to-face)." Twenty-five percent indicated they could use assistance with formatting their papers, especially the list of references, and 8% (1 student) indicated they could use assistance with their writing.

Barriers to Research

Students were also asked several questions on a Likert scale related to general difficulties they encounter while doing research. The largest problem areas were related to confusion over what the assignment actually is; problems with narrowing topics down and making them manageable; and difficulty when the topic they've chosen requires information resources from academic disciplines they are not familiar with. Students also indicated information overload, and their own tendencies to procrastinate as barriers. Approximately 30% indicated some difficulty finding resources when using the

UNC library Web Site, and 23% indicated some difficulty accessing databases and journals through the site when abroad.

Interdisciplinary Research

All of the students responded yes to the question "Would you characterize the TAM program or the research you do in TAM as "interdisciplinary"?" As a follow-up, students that answered yes were asked to elaborate by answering an open ended question about challenges they may have encountered while doing interdisciplinary research. Students' cited sources as their biggest challenge. This ranged from "finding relevant sources", to searching for sources in multiple fields "which at times can be somewhat more difficult and time consuming", to "researching thoroughly in all of the fields", dealing with "the volume of information", and the arrangement of information in different disciplines: "The journal search system we use, while encompassing thousands of journals, is sometimes daunting due to the different presentations of the articles, etc. to be found via different sources. Thus, getting statistics from one source appears very different than literature from another."

Several students cited difficulty in language translation, and one student cited "finding the right reference specialist" as a challenge. Another student remarked that "There were no real challenges, but I used the health sciences library a lot for my papers for my second TAM module."

To investigate the interdisciplinarity of students' backgrounds, questions about their current and undergraduate academic concentrations were asked. All but one student indicated their current academic concentration was political science. One student listed

International Relations as their current concentration. Students reported a variety of undergraduate backgrounds including Spanish, German, French, European Studies, International Relations, Political Science, History, International Affairs, and Social Science.

Career Plans

The majority of students indicated that the planned to work for a governmental agency or an NGO. UNICEF, the EU and The State Department were several of the agencies listed. Two students indicted they would like to continue on to PhDs, and one student listed a French K-12 licensed teacher.

Students were also asked what research skills would be useful in their future careers. The majority of students indicated that the ability to find background information on a topic, data, and US and foreign government information would be valuable to them in their future careers.

Comments

The last question on the survey provided students with an opportunity to comment on any aspect of their research process. Several students indicated that the orientation we provided at the beginning of their first semester was extremely helpful, especially since they had been abroad. One student specifcally mentioned the TAM resource web page created by the library. Several students praised the library overall; and discussed their experience with the difficulties they had encountered when using (or attempting to use)

foreign libraries. Two students indicated they had had some difficulty navigating the UNC library website, or getting a response from the library.

Graduates

Types of Assignments

The majority of graduates indicated they worked on semester long projects and theory papers while in TAM.

Research Process

Fifty percent started their research with a textbook or other reading from class, 25% talked to the professor who assigned the paper, and 25% started by consulting the UNC online library databases. By the second step, 50% had moved to the online databases, while 37% said their second step was consulting a search engine. The third step in the research process was split between talking to the professor, using a search engine, using the online UNC library resources, and visiting an academic library. Seventy-five percent reported starting their research on the UNC library web site when they were abroad.

Seventy-five percent indicated they used journal articles most in their research, and 25% indicated they used government documents. Their response to the question about resources they used when abroad was very similar to the current students' responses in that 100% indicated they used journal articles most, but they indicated they also used a variety of other sources (data sets, government documents, books and newspapers).

Graduates were almost evenly split between spending 6-9 hours, and more than 9

hours on research and resource collection; the majority was also split between spending

3-5 hours and 6-9 hours on the actual writing and editing of papers.

Forty-three percent indicated the grade they got from a professor was the most

important thing when writing a research paper.

UNC Resources

While all graduates indicated they found the UNC databases helpful to them during the

research process, 88% indicated that UNC librarians had been helpful to them and 57

% found the orientation useful.

Seventy-one percent indicated consultation with a subject expert would have helped

them in the research process; 43% would have liked instruction in finding information;

29% could have used assistance with style and citation formatting; and 86% stated they

could have used assistance in accessing information when studying abroad.

Barriers to Research

Seventy-five percent of graduates indicated that they had problems with research when

they had to narrow their topic down. Sixty-two percent indicated they had a problem

when the topic they had chosen required information resources from academic

disciplines they were not familiar with. Overall, the graduates cited few problems with

the research process.

Interdisciplinary Research

All but one of the graduates said they would characterize the TAM program as interdisciplinary.

The few graduates who did comment on the challenges associated with interdisciplinary research were very specific in their comments. One student commented on the difficulty of doing research in Italy and finding resources in Italian on politics, the economy and the welfare system. Another had difficulty find EU Sociology journals through the UNC website and had difficulty researching "European attitudes" using online UNC resources. One student simply commented on the range of areas covered in the program including "elements of cultural studies or sociology, and history in combination with more 'straight-laced' political science."

While the majority of students indicated that political science was their area of concentration while in graduate school, 1 student listed sociology and 1 listed transatlantic security. One student also commented that their thesis had political science, sociology, and public policy elements.

Graduates listed a variety of undergraduate majors including history and Spanish, political science, European Studies, psychology, English literature, German, German Language and Literature/International Area Studies (Concentration W. Europe), and French literature.

Career Plans

Graduates listed a variety of current or planned careers. Some stated general career goals such as "Federal employment", "International NGO work, most likely in a research capacity", and "looking for work in the government regarding health policy." While

current positions included "intern at an international political/diplomatic institution", "some research, program coordination, event planning and external relations in a non-profit Tue", "Acquisitions Analyst for a defense contractor. My career field will remain in the security sector.", and "Program Intern at a non-partisan, non-profit organization that works to further transatlantic relations through academic and cultural exchange."

The majority of graduates indicated that the ability to find background information on a topic, data, and US and foreign government information would be valuable to them in their future careers.

Comments

Only two graduates answered the final, open-ended question. One student stated they "had to use europa.eu a lot and any help navigating through that website would have been invaluable. " Another commented that "most of my papers were 20 pages, minimum" and that "phrasing the survey to include this information would yield more accurate attitudes about researching." The student went on to say that "Overall, I found the UNC staff very helpful when I was overseas and needed something emailed or scanned."

6.0 A Proposed Framework

The researchers were looking for patterns that emerged in participant questionnaire responses, including problems that come up frequently, as well as general patterns of positive and negative responses. The sample size for both surveys reflected the small size of the program and as such the results are not generalizable. Nevertheless, the

responses do achieve the study's aim of identifying the needs of this particular population and have implications for the growing number of interdisciplinary programs that involve study abroad.

There were several themes that emerged in both the current students and graduates survey responses. The majority indicated they had difficulty narrowing research topics down, and navigating information when resources were required in areas they were not familiar with. The vast majority agreed that TAM is an interdisciplinary program, confirming the earlier results of the interviews and syllabi analysis. The overwhelming majority of both groups surveyed indicated that consultation with a subject specialist would have helped them in the research process further echoing the unique demands they felt when doing interdisciplinary research. Finally, both groups indicated they could have used assistance in accessing information while abroad.

As reported in the literature and confirmed in the interviews and surveys, students found it difficult to use the university libraries available to them in the various foreign countries. The limited access, closed stacks, and language barrier posed a significant barrier to satisfying the students' information needs. While an introduction to the common practices of foreign libraries could easily be included in an orientation session, establishing a relationship with a librarian at the foreign country who could provide additional onsite assistance could be even more valuable.

The study also highlighted the need to maintain ongoing channels of communication with the program administrators. One of the most effective ways of contacting the students as they progressed through the program was through the TAM listserv. Messages sent through the list carried greater weight and were more likely to be read

than others. Having a liaison in the library that faculty and program coordinators could

contact when students had difficulty with their research was also important.

Based on the results of the study, the researchers proposed the following framework to

illustrate the library's approach to support (see Figure 1). The framework consists of a

library liaison at the center to serve as a primary contact and intermediary for both the

students and the program, helping to ensure that students are connected with the

appropriate subject specialists in the home library when conducting interdisciplinary

research, as well as being kept informed and periodically reminded of the library's

online services and resources when abroad. The liaison would also be responsible for

initiating contact and establishing relationships with librarians in the foreign libraries.
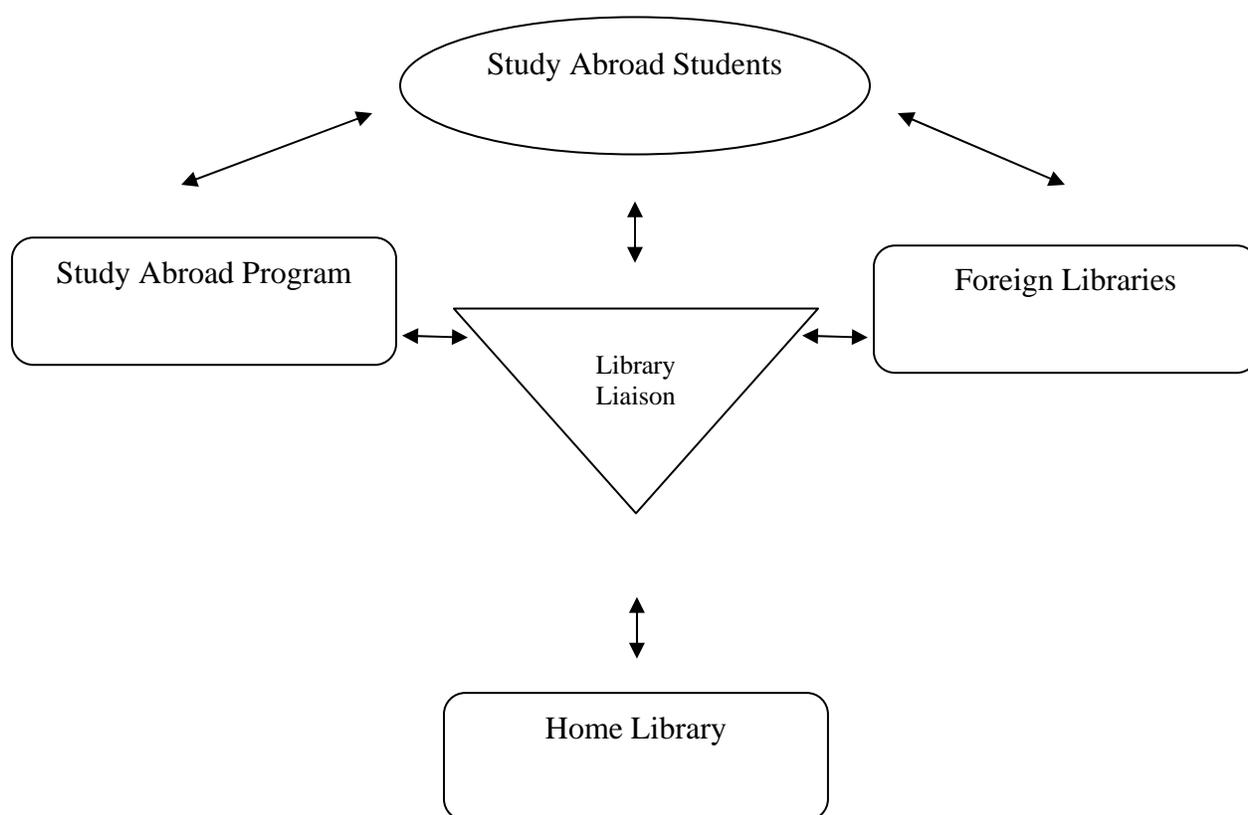
Figure 1. Proposed framework.

7.0 Study Limitations

In addition to the small number of survey respondents, several limitations to the study exist. While we hoped to do additional faculty interviews, none could be completed in the timeframe available. A broader representation of faculty involved in the program, including those abroad, would have been useful. The ability to conduct in-depth interviews with some of the students, as well as the faculty, would have also yielded richer results than that provided by the online survey. An analysis of all of the syllabi of all of the classes taught would have also been valuable in gainer a better understanding of the types of information resources needed by students as they complete their coursework. Finally, the researchers would have liked to focus more attention on the master's thesis, both from the perspective of the faculty adviser and from the students. The thesis is the most research intensive assignment students are faced with and it is often written while students are studying abroad when they lack the full support of the library.

8.0 Conclusion

Given higher education's growing emphasis on study abroad programming and the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of research, it has become imperative that students in the social sciences studying abroad know how to access and analyze a variety of information resources. These students require current and authoritative materials and access to subject specialists to support such research, a challenge compounded by the distance from their home institution. Academic libraries have an important role to play

in helping students develop the interdisciplinary research skills they need, as well as to

provide them with both online and onsite support while abroad. Despite its limitations,

we hope this study will serve as a catalyst for discussion on ways academic librarians

can respond these new academic programs and the challenges they pose.

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