

STUDYING SECURITY OVERSEAS: EXAMINING A STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM IN COLOMBIA AND PANAMA

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ABSTRACT

Study abroad programs significantly benefit student learning, but such programs are uncommon in undergraduate security studies or intelligence studies programs. This study focuses on optimizing learning activities and programmatic features of security-oriented study abroad programs, utilizing focus groups of fourteen undergraduates who completed a three-week security-focused study abroad program in Colombia and Panama in 2023. Findings show that students benefited significantly from participating in the program but struggled at some points to keep up with their assignments, especially given the intense pace of the program's activities. Students found the most learning value from interacting with people who had first-hand experience with security issues discussed in their coursework and reflecting on in-country learning activities. This paper concludes best practices and critical lessons from a study-abroad program in Colombia and Panama.

Keywords: *study abroad education, security studies, Colombia, Panama*

INTRODUCTION

Study abroad education has long been promoted as an opportunity for students to expand their horizons, learn about foreign cultures, and get hands-on learning experiences unavailable at the students' home institutions or even in their home countries. The experience of living and studying in a foreign environment presents students with both formal and informal opportunities to learn. Many universities and organizations offer such programs, and research suggests they may lead to better educational outcomes for undergraduates (Varela, 2017; Boonen et al., 2021) and better prepare them for the early stages of their careers (Ruth et al., 2019; Potts, 2015). Study abroad programs may also significantly impact participants' lives, helping them develop a global worldview and a greater desire to participate in community activities around them (Paige et al., 2009; Jon & Fry, 2021; Bieluch et al., 2021).

Security-focused study abroad programs are relatively rare in the world of international education. While an internet search reveals hundreds of programs focused on language and culture, it reveals relatively few programs that cater to students of security studies or intelligence studies, two relatively niche fields in undergraduate education. Language and culture programs may complement security studies and intelligence studies education but typically give little attention to research on the home country's security problems and policies. Education abroad can

prove highly valuable for students wanting to gain critical insights into security-related subjects beyond classroom learning in their home countries. The author created and led a security studies program in Latin America to achieve those educational goals. The program was a three-week study tour in May 2023, taking undergraduate students to Bogota, Colombia, Medellin, Colombia, and Panama City, Panama. Most of the students were intelligence and security studies majors. The program matched their intellectual interests more closely than most other Coastal Carolina University (CCU) study-abroad programs. As this program was new, it seemed prudent to evaluate its effectiveness, learn about study abroad education for students in this field, and improve future program offerings.

This research study aims to assess how much study abroad education may improve undergraduate students' understanding of security-related topics. Given the global nature of many security threats, security studies or intelligence studies students may have a particular interest in studying abroad. Programs crafted to suit this purpose may sometimes be unconventional in their destinations or learning activities, making program assessments valuable. This study assessed the learning activities and programmatic design of CCU's 2023 Security Studies in Latin America study abroad program to identify which aspects of the program were most effective in delivering high-quality educational experiences. Security-oriented study abroad programs are rare and come with unique challenges, making the study's results all the more valuable in building our collective understanding of how to serve students best and achieve learning objectives with international programs.

The author utilized focus groups with fourteen students from the Security Studies in Latin America program to assess the impact of study abroad learning activities and programmatic design. The analysis shows that the three-week study tour of Colombia and Panama effectively achieved student learning objectives, even in locations whose historical and contemporary levels of violence created nearly as many risk management concerns as learning opportunities. Students found particularly significant educational benefits from interactions with people who had lived through events discussed in their studies and from opportunities to reflect on activities conducted overseas. A significant drawback of this program's design is that many students struggled to keep up with assignments because of its short and intense itinerary, especially if they had not completed course readings before departure.

SECURITY-FOCUSED STUDY ABROAD EDUCATION & PROGRAM DESIGN OPTIONS

There are relatively few published works relating to security-oriented programs. The research most closely associated with this topic comes from scholars focused on peacebuilding. For example, Pugh (2013) found that participants in a Peacebuilding in Latin America program taking U.S. undergraduates to Ecuador reported significant benefits to their understanding of peace as an academic topic and improved professional and cross-cultural skills. Olberding and Olberding (2010) arrived at a similar result in their study of U.S. high school students participating in the Seeds of Peace program, a public diplomacy effort by the U.S. State Department that focuses on peacebuilding education for youth. Relatedly, Carey et al. (2022)

conducted a graduate-level study abroad program in Spain focusing on emergency management and interviewed students after major learning activities to examine their effectiveness. Their findings show that a combination of reflective assignments, fieldwork, exposure to a foreign culture, and a robust curriculum was highly effective in helping students understand how natural disasters impact societies.

Study abroad education can be a significant asset to students planning careers in the security sector. Intelligence agencies value study abroad experience in students applying for analytic positions (Dujmovic, 2017). The Office of the Director of National Intelligence (2023a, 2023b) lists scholarships for U.S. college students interested in learning foreign languages, including programs overseas. It is common for students of security studies and intelligence studies to seek employment in government agencies, so it is certainly notable that the Intelligence Community encourages students to apply for programs, including the Department of State's (2023) Critical Language Scholarship Programs Boren Scholarship, which funds education abroad (See also Defense Language and National Security Education Office, 2023).

Short-term study abroad programs, often conducted during the summer, are increasingly popular options for U.S.-based universities (Ogden & Streitweiser, 2016; Sachau et al., 2010). The short duration and timing outside the regular academic year make it easier for faculty and students to fit into a study abroad program without disrupting their normal work or school schedules. While some studies indicate that it may have a weaker impact on students' overall learning compared to a more traditional semester or year-long program, short-term study abroad education is still effective in improving students' understandings of academic subject matter and foreign societies, as well as expanding their overall worldview (Coker et al., 2018; Ingraham & Peterson, 2004). Alternatively, Ogden and Streitweiser (2016) find that short-term programs are as impactful as long-term programs, especially in broadening students' worldviews. In terms of program design for summer study abroad programs, Sachau et al. (2010) identify three models the programs can take: (1) longer, summer-semester programs that run for much of the summer, often anchored to a primary location or University overseas, (2) the study tour, focusing on seeing a large number of things in two or three weeks, and (3) experiences working or volunteering abroad. Each of these comes with pluses and minuses, the first two varieties contrasting depth versus breadth of learning experiences and slow versus fast pacing of the program. The third variety provides a more hands-on experience and often integrates practitioners' perspectives.

Research shows that students tend to benefit more from their short-term study abroad experience under several conditions. First, participation in daily local activities and direct exposure to the culture and perspectives of people from the host country significantly improve student learning outcomes and provide learning opportunities difficult to obtain elsewhere (Wang et al., 2011). Second, lessons taught before departure enhance in-country experiences, giving context to subsequent learning activities (Starr-Glass, 2016; Boonen et al., 2021). Third, reflection on subject matter and learning activities is crucial in helping students process, interpret, and appreciate in-country learning activities (Whatley et al., 2021; Carey et al., 2022).

SECURITY STUDIES IN LATIN AMERICA: A NEW PROGRAM

In 2022, the author proposed and received approval for a new study abroad program to run the following year titled Security Studies in Latin America, which covered a broad array of regional security problems and policies to address them. This program was a three-week study tour divided between the Colombian cities of Bogota and Medellin and Panama's capital, Panama City. The author selected these three locations because of their historical struggles with crime and political violence, their governments' cooperation with the U.S., and their impact on regional security. The program included 18 CCU students and three faculty members, supported by contractors from Campus B, a company specializing in logistical support for universities operating study abroad programs in Latin America. Working with this company proved immensely helpful in keeping daily activities running smoothly by providing transportation, translation services, tour booking, and advice on various activities and local places.

Students chose three courses: Drugs, Crime, and Urban Security, Regional Security Studies – Latin America, and Introduction to Peace and Conflict Studies. All but one of the students enrolled in the first class, and the other classes had four and two students, respectively. No student took more than two courses. Students received access to course materials several months before departure. However, since study abroad courses were “Maymester” classes, university policy did not allow faculty to set deadlines for these classes' assignments before the end of the spring semester.

Colombia's turbulent history makes it an excellent location for studying security. On the one hand, it experienced the longest-running armed conflict in the Western Hemisphere and has struggled mightily with terrorism, drug cartels, street crime, and displacement (Theidon, 2016; Rettberg, 2019). On the other hand, it has an impressive history with peacemaking, extensive security cooperation with the U.S., and is home to the city of Medellin, often cited as a success story in urban security (Giraldo-Ramírez & Preciado-Restrepo, 2015; Colak & Pearce, 2015). Panama has political and economic ties to the U.S. due to the history of the Panama Canal and the previous U.S. military presence. Its contemporary status as a central hub for money laundering¹ and the impact of U.S. military intervention in Panama increases its relevance to a security-focused program. Flights to both countries are short and inexpensive from the U.S., and U.S. citizens are not required to obtain visas for short stays. Having been to both countries previously, the author was confident that Colombia and Panama had sufficient infrastructure and learning opportunities for a high-quality educational program.

In planning the program, the author ran into a hurdle in obtaining approval from CCU to send students to Colombia due to safety concerns. The Department of State identifies Colombia as a level three travel advisory country, listing terrorism, kidnapping, and crime as major concerns for U.S. travelers.² Due to risk management concerns relating to Colombia's level three travel advisory status, the proposal for this program required a close review from CCU's International Travel Risk Committee. As a result, the University required our group to work with the logistics company and impose special safety rules on participants. Students were required to sign a

waiver, have supervision whenever outside the hotel, and abide by a strict curfew while in Colombia. Lastly, we agreed to conduct safety training on various issues cited in the State Department travel advisory for Colombia, including crime, terrorism, and kidnapping.

We finalized a group activity list by researching activities online, speaking with professional contacts in the two countries, and consulting our third-party logistics provider. We produced a final schedule that included two activities for most days, with longer excursions planned for the end of the week. The final day in Panama was a “decompression day,” where students were free to choose activities for themselves, something our safety rules precluded from our time in Colombia. Nearly all students in the program decided to visit a nearby island for hiking and time at the beach. Our program’s activities included the following:

- Guided tours of Bogota, Medellin, and Panama City, covering the history and key landmarks of each city
- A guided tour of the National Police Museum of Colombia
- A guided tour of the National Military Museum of Colombia
- A guest lecture by a professor at the University of the Andes on the aftermath of the peace deal between Colombia’s government and the FARC rebel group
- Visits to the Memory, Peace, and Reconciliation Center in Bogota and the House of Memory Museum in Medellin, two museums memorializing the people killed by violence in Colombia’s decades of armed conflict
- A tour of the District Secretariat of Security, Coexistence, and Justice, covering a detention facility that is part of an innovative program by the City of Bogota to reduce criminal recidivism
- A dinner with two U.S. Embassy officials in Colombia
- A visit to Comuna 13, once the most violent part of Medellin, now a widely regarded success story in crime reduction
- A guided tour of the Pablo Escobar Museum
- A two-day visit to the University of Medellin (UdeM), including lectures on Colombia’s political violence and a joint project between CCU and UdeM students to analyze and present the armed conflict from the viewpoints of the involved parties
- A visit to D’Arrieros Coffee, a coffee plantation, including a presentation about the art and science of coffee production and a coffee-tasting
- An excursion to the lakeside town of Guatape and Piedra del Peñol, an iconic rock formation
- A visit to SENAFRONT, Panama’s border patrol service
- A visit to CONAPRED, a Panamanian government agency aiming to reduce drug use
- Visits to the Sumapaz Foundation, an NGO dealing with human rights issues in Colombia
- A visit to Panama City’s Museum of Liberty, which focuses on human rights
- A visit to the Panama Canal and the Panama Canal Museum
- A rainforest hike in Panama City’s Parque Metropolitano, led by park rangers

The Drugs, Crime, and Urban Security instructor assigned students ten readings and two documentaries, requiring them to take notes on each. Students were required to write a paper or produce a presentation on the topic of their choice that related to the course material. They had to keep a travel journal of their daily activities and complete a take-home exam with questions about the readings and in-country learning activities. Participation in the in-country activities was required and was part of their grade.

METHODOLOGY

The author conducted a focus group session with the students to assess the program design and learning value of activities included in the Security Studies in Latin America program. Focus group research is a qualitative data collection method to understand better subjects' opinions and behaviors (Powell & Single, 1996). Many organizations also use focus groups for program planning and evaluation, gathering feedback from participants or customers on critical features of the program (Morgan, 1996; Duffy, 1993). With this method, participants are recruited based on some common characteristic – participation in a program, for example – and allowed to respond freely to questions in a group setting. A researcher asks scripted, open-ended questions and serves as a moderator, asking follow-up questions if necessary (Morgan, 1996; Powell & Single, 1996; Parker & Tritter, 2006). Some experts on focus group research note that depending on group dynamics, some participants may self-censor (Morgan, 1996) or feel pressure to conform to the opinions of fellow participants (Powell & Single, 1996). However, group settings may also have the opposite effect, as participants are often more willing to share information amongst peers rather than in one-on-one sessions with a researcher (Byers & Wilcox, 1991). Interaction between participants—a unique characteristic of focus group research—may lead to discussions or reveal disagreements between participants, information that may prove valuable to the researcher (Morgan, 1996; Parker & Tritter, 2006). In the present study, the open-ended focus group methodology allows students to express their opinions of the program in great detail in a group setting where interaction with peers may encourage further sharing of ideas.

The focus group was entirely voluntary, and students were offered extra credit in exchange for their participation. All participants signed an informed consent form and were assured they could discontinue participation without penalty, that identifying information about them would be withheld from publications, and that their responses would not impact their course grades. As the principal investigator, the author moderated the discussion, asking the students the following ten questions:

1. Considering the learning activities involved in this program, such as class assignments, group discussions, tours, excursions, etc., which do you think had the greatest impact on your learning experience and why?
2. What do you think of the pacing of this program, scheduling one week per city? Was this the right amount of time, and to what extent did the pacing impact your learning experience?
3. Of the three cities we visited during this program, which has taught you the most about security issues and why?

4. To what extent, if at all, have cultural experiences or informal interactions with people in Colombia and Panama improved or complemented your learning of security-related subject matter?
5. To what extent, if at all, have this program's pre-departure trainings prepared you for this study in Colombia and Panama? Are there any other trainings you would have found useful but did not receive?
6. Are there any aspects of this program that could easily have been replicated with studies in the United States? Are there any aspects that could not have been? If so, what are they and why?
7. Are there any specific experiences from your time studying abroad that have changed your perspective on security issues? If so, what were they?
8. Were there any aspects of this program that surprised you or differed markedly from your expectations?
9. Was there any aspect of this program that you would like to see changed?
10. Are there any other comments about this study abroad program that you would like to express before we end our focus group session?

RESULTS FROM FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS

In the two focus group sessions, several trends became apparent. First, students felt they learned the most from activities that allowed them to speak with locals about security issues or reflect on the day's activities. Students found greater learning value in our time in Colombia than in Panama, with Medellin being where they learned the most. They cited the Comuna 13 and UdeM visits as the two learning activities where they appreciated the exposure to local perspectives and unique experiences. Students in both focus groups, especially the first, reported feeling exhausted from the busy itinerary and from completing readings and other assigned work in-country. Despite this issue, students found the program overall to be a highly favorable experience and reported that the study abroad experience yielded significant benefits to their learning. Students' comments are summarized below.

Value of Learning Activities and Replicability in the U.S.

Nearly all students said they learned quite a lot during the program, and most felt its learning activities would be difficult to replicate in the U.S. This was especially true of activities with highly context-specific significance or which otherwise require an in-person experience to appreciate fully. Specifically, they cited our visit to Comuna 13, their discussions and projects with the UdeM students, and our guided tours as examples. The students cited these activities and the travel journals as having the most significant learning value.

Pacing of Program

Regarding the pacing of the program, allowing one week per city, the students found this time in each city sufficient, some even describing it as the perfect amount of time to allot per city. The

students had new experiences in each city and were not in any town long enough to lose interest in the locations. Multiple students in both focus group sessions expressed a desire for a decompression day at the end of our time in each city, not just at the end of the trip. Discussion of what this might entail focused on allowing time to rest, catch up on coursework, or participate in self-selected unstructured group activities.

Cities with the Highest Learning Value

Most students characterized Medellin as the city where they learned the most about security-related subjects. The students who identified Medellin as the city that contributed most to their learning outcomes highlighted the visits to Comuna 13 and UdeM as particularly impactful. Most students attended a professional soccer game in Medellin—an activity not on our official itinerary—and found it a valuable cultural experience. Bogota was a distant second place, favored by students who highly enjoyed the National Police Museum, the National Military Museum, and the guest lecture by a professor from the University of the Andes. They also expressed enthusiasm for exploring the cities with guided tours highlighting their history and culture. Students in both groups reported that the Colombian segments of the trip contributed more to their learning than the Panamanian segment. They attributed this to Colombia's history of severe violence and said that Colombia was more interesting for academic and cultural reasons due to its significant differences from U.S. culture.

Culture and Informal Interactions with Locals

When asked whether cultural activities or informal interactions with Colombians and Panamanians contributed to their learning outcomes, all students expressing an opinion on the matter said it did. The students focused their responses, especially on their interactions with students in Medellin. Several students recounted stories told to them by the UdeM students, several of whom had families significantly impacted by political violence or shared their personal experiences with or opinions about crime and policing. Many students in the focus group expressed appreciation for being able to observe daily life in the three cities. One of the students recounted a story of a police officer at a metro station in Medellin who saw our group waiting for a train to the soccer game and provided friendly advice on avoiding pickpockets. The student found this nice gesture quite admirable and compared the interaction favorably with experiences with police in the U.S.

Pre-departure Training

Students gave mixed responses about the effectiveness of the pre-departure safety training. Some pointed out that the training may help students without foreign travel experience, but those with more extensive travel experience found the exercise redundant. Several students said they appreciated the anti-terrorism and anti-kidnapping training they received, which might have been helpful in an emergency and heightened students' overall situational awareness. One student pointed out that we experienced an earthquake in Bogota and that they were glad the training

covered earthquakes and other natural disasters common to our program's destinations. Several students suggested that future pre-departure training include basic Spanish language lessons to reduce the language barrier. Several students indicated that a more significant discussion of local clothing and foods may have been helpful before departure.

Experiences that Surprised the Students

When asked whether anything from the program surprised them or differed markedly from their expectations, multiple students responded that Colombia was safer than they expected. Several students recounted discussions with friends and family members who expressed concern about whether Colombia was too dangerous for travel. One student commented that sharing photos and stories of Colombia with family members significantly changed their perception of the country. Multiple students expressed surprise at seeing the dramatic sights of Comuna 13 and learning of its part in Medellín's security transformation. Several students recounted times when Colombians emphasized how much the country has changed since the 1980s and 1990s. Students mentioned many of these things when asked whether aspects of the trip caused them to change their point of view. On that point, one student expressed surprise at the militant approaches Colombia and Medellín had historically taken to dealing with internal security issues. Several students also stated that after speaking with the Colombian National Police, visiting the detention facility in Bogotá, and learning about the crime reduction efforts in Medellín, they felt more open-minded to progressive law enforcement strategies aimed at reducing recidivism or diverting youth from joining gangs.

Things Students Would Like Changed

When asked what they would like to see changed about the program—and at various other parts of the discussion—the students expressed a desire for fewer assignments and more free time. The students reported feeling exhausted at the end of each day due to the many activities on the schedule. Many had not completed the readings before departure and reported struggling to complete assignments in the evening when they were tired and wanted to relax. Students in the first focus group session gave this point extreme emphasis. Interestingly, several students who complained about the courseload admitted that the readings contributed positively to their learning outcomes, although they had difficulty completing tasks and written assignments abroad. Several students commented that the formal assignments detracted from their overall appreciation or enjoyment of the study abroad experience. Several students commented that the in-person learning activities greatly outweighed the value of the course readings. Several students recommended that future iterations of the program grade students more rigorously on participation and reduce the overall number of graded assignments.

Apart from the issues of coursework and free time, multiple students discussed a possible omission in the programming for Panama. They pointed out that despite money laundering being a significant focus of our coursework regarding Panama, our itinerary did not include any guest speakers or tours that addressed the topic. Several students in the second focus group suggested

that our group's size—eighteen students and three faculty members—was too large and sometimes resulted in delays in getting ready for group events, choosing restaurants, and moving through the store checkout lines. One student recommended removing Panama City entirely from future iterations of this program, as they considered it to offer less learning value than Bogota or Medellin.

Students' Final Comments Regarding the Study Abroad Program

When asked if there were any final comments they would like to make regarding the program, most students expressed great satisfaction with the overall quality of their learning experience. Multiple students expressed great satisfaction with the program and characterized the experience as “amazing” or a “once-in-a-lifetime experience.” One student described the decision to participate in the study abroad program as their best decision. Additional responses to this question included a discussion of whether the program would be better with smaller group size, the possibility of offering a semester-long version of the study abroad courses, and another comment lamenting that we had been unable to do our planned visit to the United Nations office in Panama City.

CONCLUSION

Security-oriented study abroad programs are rare. Students' appraisals of this program were overall positive. Their comments provide valuable insights into the value of security-oriented study-abroad programs and opportunities to fine-tune the program in future iterations. Interestingly, students consistently mentioned their time in Colombia as far more critical than Panama to learning about security. Colombia's turbulent history and remarkable improvements in recent years provided tremendous material for discussion in a security studies trip and drew the students further from their “comfort zones,” advancing learning. Colombia's security problems significantly shaped the learning value for student participants and their approach to risk management for this program.

The students tended to favor experiences that allowed them to speak to locals directly about security-related topics. For example, they discussed visiting Comuna 13 and UdeM or speaking to the Colombian National Police as particularly impactful activities. Students also valued the reflective journal assignments to help them mentally process daily activities. They also benefited greatly from formal and informal experiences with local culture and viewpoints, which expanded their understanding of the two countries and contextualized the subject matter of our lessons. In addition to the students' comments, the instructors observed that students who completed the readings before departure or before related in-person activities made more and faster connections between our tours and the academic material.

This program's “study tour” design, taking the students on visits to multiple sites on most days, allowed us to see and do as much as possible in a short time in-country, but students found it tiring. The comments about being exhausted from the long days illustrate a downside to this program, as suggested in the literature on study abroad education. Based on our group's

experience, increasing pre-departure learning activities may benefit the students in terms of academics and stress management. The selection of assignments, students' time management skills, and opportunities for pre-departure learning all influence the degree to which the in-country activities seem rushed or exhausting and merit consideration in trip planning. Combining the short-term overseas study tour with a semester-long course or more extensive in-person pre-departure education during the May or summer sessions could alleviate this problem. The students generally found a week per city appropriate for achieving the learning objectives, an essential detail for planning future program itineraries. Future iterations of this program will require monitoring for student fatigue and expanded opportunities to decompress regularly.

As a faculty leader of this program, the author concludes that it has met or exceeded our goals. Setting up a new study abroad program is a serious undertaking, especially when it involves a destination whose security situation heightens risk management concerns. Fortunately, our group did not fall victim to any difficulties discussed in the State Department's travel advisories, and the author would feel comfortable bringing future student groups into such environments. Cooperation with an external company for logistics coordination proved extremely helpful in setting up and running the program. Regarding in-country experiences, the mix of cultural activities and more serious academic ones gave the trip a sense of balance, allowing the students to connect with the new environment and learn about crucial security topics such as terrorism, armed conflict, drug trafficking, and policing. Ultimately, the experience with the Colombia/Panama program indicates that while they are unusual, security-oriented study abroad programs provide immense value to students, given the right environment and a carefully planned itinerary and curriculum.

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¹ At the time of writing, Panama remains on the Financial Action Task Force’s (2023) “Grey List” of countries subject to increased monitoring due to their deficiencies in fighting money laundering and terrorist financing. Panama is also home to numerous shell companies used for tax avoidance and money laundering, a fact highlighted by the so-called Panama Papers scandal uncovered in 2016. For further details, see Unger (2017).

² The U.S. State Department has a four-tier system for rating the safety of foreign countries for U.S. travelers. Colombia is categorized as a level three country, meaning U.S. citizens should “reconsider travel.”