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Distributed Responsibility in Experiential Learning: A Role-Based Framework for Increasing Student Engagement in Study Abroad Programs

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Abstract

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This paper presents and evaluates a role-based pedagogical framework designed to transform students from passive participants into active contributors within study abroad environments. While experiential learning programs offer immersive educational opportunities, many struggle with student passivity, uneven participation, and logistical demands that fall heavily on faculty. Traditional approaches often position students as observers rather than contributors, limiting opportunities for engagement and leadership.

Over four years of implementation in faculty-led study abroad programs with cohorts ranging from 12 to 40 students, a structured system of distributed leadership roles was developed across operational, communicative, and cultural domains. Students assumed defined responsibilities before and during the program, producing tangible deliverables and reflective summaries tied to their roles.

Findings from multiple program iterations indicate that visible responsibility shifts student behavior toward increased engagement, accountability, and leadership. Students demonstrate stronger peer coordination and ownership of the learning environment, while faculty benefit from distributed logistical support. These results suggest that role-based responsibility structures provide an effective and transferable model for enhancing experiential learning across study abroad programs, studio courses, and project-based environments.

Keywords: Experiential Learning, Study Abroad, Peer Accountability, Student Engagement, Pedagogical Design