

## Willingness to Study Abroad: An Examination of Kuwaiti Students

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International education is an increasingly important part of business programs throughout the world. This paper investigates the willingness of Kuwaiti business students to study abroad. It tests the hypotheses that student willingness to study abroad is related to a number of variables, including self-efficacy, perceived benefit of study abroad, language ability, previous international experience and having friends and family with international experience. Implications for designing and marketing business study abroad programs are addressed.

*Keywords:* Study abroad, Kuwait, willingness

International education has become a big business for the United States. Many U.S. colleges and universities are dependent upon international students for a large portion of their tuition revenue and enrollment determined budget and this dependence will likely increase (Agarwal & Winkler, 1985). Additionally, international students studying in the U.S. contribute more than 12 billion dollars annually to the U.S. economy (Altbach, 2004). Approximately two million students currently study outside of their home country. This number is expected to increase to about eight million by 2025 (Altbach, 2004). Of these two million students, 723,277 are international students choosing to study in the U.S. This is a

thirty-two percent increase since the 2000-2001 academic year (Institute of International Education, 2011). As this dependence upon international students increases, it becomes necessary for U.S. colleges and universities to understand why these students choose to study abroad and what factors can lead them to choose the U.S. over other locations.

For these international students in the U.S., business management is the top field of study with 21.5 percent choosing this as their major (Institute of International Education, 2011). The number of Middle Eastern students studying in the U.S. has increased by sixteen percent from the 2009/10 academic year. There has been a particularly strong increase in students from

Qatar, UAE, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait (Institute of International Education, 2010). This paper focuses on Kuwaiti business students and their willingness to study abroad.

## **BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Background**

In recent years, Kuwait has been taking significant steps toward investing in education. Private higher education was banned in Kuwait for more than three decades. Kuwait University, a state owned university, was the only option for students who wanted to earn a college degree in Kuwait. However, as the number of Kuwaiti students demanding a college education grew to approximately 1 million in the 1990s, Kuwait University could not keep up (Mills, 2009).

About a decade ago, Kuwait lifted their ban on private higher education but not without several requirements for the private investors wishing to develop their own universities. One requirement is that all new private universities must have a foreign partner university. Since this policy has been put into place, there have been eight new universities and nine more have been authorized to open in the next few years (Mills, 2009). Several recognizable U.S. universities are paired with the private Kuwaiti institutions. For example the University of Missouri at St. Louis is paired with the Gulf University for Science and Technology and Dartmouth is paired with the American University of Kuwait. This pairing could be helping Kuwaiti students gain a recognition and connection to American universities making international study in the U.S. more comfortable and enticing.

The number of Kuwaiti students leaving the country in order to continue their education continues to increase (Oxford Business Group, 2011). More than two thousand Kuwaiti students are studying in the U.K. and this number has been steadily increasing since 2004. Additionally, the number of Kuwaiti students studying in the U.S. has increase by 22.8 percent between the 2009/10 school year and the 2010/11 school year (Institute of International Education, 2011). This growth is unlikely to slow. More than three thousand students attended the annual Kuwait Study Abroad Fair

in February of 2011 and more than 3800 applications were received for 1800 study abroad positions (Oxford Business Group, 2011). This growth could be driven by the November 2010 government policy change. Moudi Al Humoud, then minister of education, announced that salaries for study abroad students would be increased by 20%. Moudi Al Humoud announced at the 27<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the American Branch of NUKS that “We look at any increase as an investment in the human factor and our students deserve more.”

### **Literature Review**

As study abroad has continued to increase in popularity, there has been an increase in the literature seeking to explain it. Hackney, Boggs, and Borozan (2012) conducted a study on the willingness of American business students to study abroad. Based on a survey of over 300 students from a Midwestern university, they concluded that students are more willing to study abroad short-term than they are long-term. They also found that personal, situational, and locational variables influence students’ willingness to study abroad. Surprisingly, results showed no relationship between having taken an international business course and willingness to study abroad. The current paper is meant extend Hackney et al.’s (2012) research by examining Kuwaiti business students’ willingness to study abroad.

Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen and Pascarella (2009) focused on the choice process of students’ intent to study abroad. By applying both student choice theory (Paulsen & St. John, 2002; St. John & Asker, 2001) and Laura Perna’s (2006) integrated model to predict college choice, they found that socioeconomic status, social capital, and cultural capital influence students’ intent to study abroad. They also concluded that females were more likely to study abroad than males.

Kim and Goldstein (2005) compared students who intended to study abroad and students who did not intend to study abroad. They observed different aspects of intercultural attitudes including ethnocentrism, apprehension of intercultural communication, interest and competence in languages, prejudice, ambiguity tolerance, and expectations about study-abroad

programs. They found that the students who intended to study abroad had lower levels of ethnocentrism and were less apprehensive about communicating with other cultures than those students who did not intend to study abroad. Additionally, students intending to study abroad were more interested in foreign language study. The authors suggested that in order to increase student interest in study abroad, universities should seek to reduce ethnocentrism and intercultural communication apprehension. They also suggested that universities could implement programs that would communicate the value of foreign language study to students.

Toncar, Reid, & Anderson (2005), also examined the differences between two groups of students by studying business students' and non-business students' motivations to study abroad. They found that business students were more pragmatic, more concerned about financial costs, and more concerned about how participating in a study abroad program would impact graduation and future career opportunities. However, the program preferences for each group of students were very similar. The authors concluded that although motivations may differ between business and nonbusiness students, universities could develop programs to satisfy both groups simultaneously.

Using expectancy theory, Sánchez, Fornerino, and Zhang (2006), analyzed the relationship between student motivations and intentions to study abroad. Their study focused on U.S., Chinese, and French business students studying in their home country. Results showed that the same four barriers existed for each nationality; familial, financial, psychological, and social. There were also similarities in motivations, however the authors suggested that while the students were encouraged and discouraged to study abroad by similar stimuli, the specific composition of these stimuli differed in different countries.

Relyea, Cocchiara, and Studdard (2008) also applied expectancy theory to examine students' motivations to study abroad. They specifically studied students' motivations in regard to risk propensity and perceived value. They found that risk propensity has a direct relationship with the likelihood to engage in an international experience and that the perceived career value

moderates this relationship. This suggests that motivating students to study abroad is both complex and challenging. The authors propose that universities should take responsibility and provide its students with a global education that teaches them the value of an international experience. Furthermore, the authors suggest that university administrators could help mitigate the risk students perceive by demonstrating that studying abroad is manageable.

Presley, Damron-Martinez, & Zhang (2010) applied Ajzen's theory of planned behavior to study business students' intention to study abroad. According to this theory, individuals are more likely to execute a behavior if they have a high intention of executing the behavior. There are three predictors of behavioral intention (1) attitude toward the behavior, (2) subjective norm, and (3) perceived behavioral control. Individuals' attitude toward the behavior refers to whether they evaluate the behavior positively or negatively. The subjective norm predictor takes into consideration the peer pressure individuals perceive that might influence their choice to perform the behavior. Perceived behavioral control refers to the ease or difficulty with which individuals can perform the behavior. This takes into account both past experiences and anticipated obstacles. When all three predictors are strong, individuals will have a greater intention of engaging in the behavior. Their results showed that students' intention to study abroad was influenced by all three factors.

Extending the theory of planned behavior, Goel, de Jong, and Schnusenberg (2010) incorporated personality traits such as conscientiousness, openness to experience, and extraversion. The authors argued that personality plays a role in students' beliefs related to studying abroad. They hypothesized that behavioral beliefs, subjective beliefs, and control beliefs are positively related to the intention to study abroad. Their results showed that extraversion was positively related to behavioral beliefs and both conscientiousness and extraversion were positively related to control beliefs. The authors concluded that personality does indeed play a role in students' beliefs related to study abroad and that different

personality traits influence different beliefs to varying extents.

Koirala-Azad and Blundell (2011), focusing on Nepali high school and university students, examined the motivations and feelings of both the students who choose to leave the country for higher education and those who choose to stay. They found that the decision process to stay or to go is filled with complicated choices and many influences. By conducting interviews, they concluded that cost is one of the main barriers for students choosing to study abroad. They also found that women faced additional barriers such as extremely protective parents and the fact that upon completion of a bachelor's degree, a Nepali woman in her early to mid-twenties is considered too old for marriage. Culture also played a huge role. Not only did most students feel an intense nationalism, consistent with Nepali culture, they put their families first which often created another barrier to study abroad. The authors claimed that overall, the students interviewed seemed to want to study abroad regardless of whether or not it was an option.

### **THEORY DEVELOPMENT AND DISCUSSION**

Study abroad gives students the opportunity to learn and grow as an individual. Research has identified several benefits, both personal and professional, that result from participating in a study abroad program.

Participation in study abroad programs has been shown to increase students' concern for international politics, cross-cultural interest and broaden their worldview (Carlson & Widaman, 1988). Consistent with Salisbury et al. (2009), Dwyer and Peters (2004) found that study abroad resulted in benefits such as increased maturity, self-confidence, tolerance of ambiguity, and language competency. Students can also develop emotional resilience, flexibility, and greater independence while studying abroad (Kitsantas, 2004). By studying abroad, students get the opportunity to enhance their understanding of different cultures, races, customs, and business practices, which increases tolerance, respect and open mindedness (Praetzel, Curcio, & Dilorenzo, 1996). After completing a study abroad program, students are

more able to think of national groups in terms of individual characteristics instead of solely in terms of non-personal attributes such as cultural traditions, food, and famous people from that country.

Not only do these benefits help students grow as a person, they can also help students be more marketable to future employers. Students who spend time abroad develop "a deeper understanding and respect for global issues, more favorable attitudes toward other cultures, stronger intercultural communication skills, improved personal and professional self-image, and better foreign language skills" (Salisbury et al., 2009, p. 120). The 2003 Rand Corporation Study "What makes a Successful Career Professional in an International Organization" had managers identify the most desirable qualifications of new hires. Many of the skills managers listed can result from participating in a study abroad program such as cross-cultural competence, the ability to work well in different cultures and with people of different origins, interpersonal and relationship skills, ambiguity tolerance and adaptability (Matherly, 2005). Loh, Steagall, Gallo, and Michelman (2011) found that student perceptions that study abroad will enhance their job market prospects is associated with the amount they are willing to pay for the study abroad experience.

Expectancy theory states that individuals will be motivated to exert effort if they believe that doing so has valence or will result in a reward (Greenberg, 2010). Based on the numerous benefits research has shown resulting from studying abroad, we predict that the more students perceive the personal and/or professional benefits of study abroad, the more willing they will be to participate in a study-abroad program.

- H1: *Willingness to study abroad is positively associated with perceived personal benefit.*
- H2: *Willingness to study abroad is positively associated with perceived professional benefit.*

Self-efficacy can be defined as an individual's belief about his or her ability to successfully perform specific tasks (Greenberg,

2010). Individuals with a high self-efficacy are confident that they possess the knowledge and skills necessary to execute a task. We predict that self-efficacy, defined as students' confidence in their knowledge, skills, and abilities to study abroad successfully, is associated positively with willingness to study abroad.

- H3: *Willingness to study abroad is positively associated with self-efficacy (belief that one possesses the knowledge, skills, and ability to succeed).*

Oftentimes, student behaviors are greatly influenced both positively and negatively by their family and/or friends. The individuals that one interacts with daily, communicates with and shares common interests with can have an impact on one's decisions. Research has shown that students especially value their parents' opinions (Presley et al., 2010). Accordingly, we predict that students' willingness to study abroad will be positively related to the extent to which their family members have had international experiences. Furthermore, we predict that having close friends with international experience will increase willingness to study abroad.

- H4: *Willingness to study abroad is positively associated with having family and/or friends with international experience.*

Fear of the unknown may be motivation enough to cause students to avoid studying abroad in a foreign country. However, having previous experience traveling abroad either for vacation or study could whet a student's appetite for more. A previous international experience would likely boost a student's confidence that they can go abroad and be successful and alleviate some of the fear of the process. One of the most popular ways for students to gain this previous international experience is a short-term study abroad trip. For example, Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005), surveyed students who participated in a two-week summer study abroad trip to Costa Rica and found that upon returning to the U.S., half of them planned to study abroad

again. Many of these students drew a clear connection from their desire to study abroad again to their experience in Costa Rica. While the level of student willingness to study abroad could depend on whether their original trip was positive or negative, it is the authors' contention that positive international travel experiences are far more common than negative ones. We hypothesize that student willingness to study abroad will be positively associated with having previous international experience.

- H5: *Willingness to study abroad is positively associated with having previous international experience.*
- H6: *Willingness to study abroad is negatively associated with having committed personal relationships locally/domestically.*

For many years, one of the main motivations behind study abroad was the opportunity to study or to practice a foreign language (Holland & Kedia, 2003; Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Presley et al., 2010). Research has shown that increased language proficiency is one of the many benefits of study abroad (Kim & Goldstein, 2005; Salisbury et al., 2009). Additionally, if a student has studied a foreign language, they will feel more at ease in a foreign country that speaks that language than if they had no ability in that language whatsoever. The ability to communicate in a foreign country can make the experience much more positive. Accordingly, we predict that foreign language competence is positively associated with willingness to study abroad.

- H7: *Foreign language ability is positively associated with willingness to study abroad.*

Research has shown that there is a gender gap in study abroad participants and that females are more likely to study abroad than males (Thomas & McMahan, 1998; Kim & Goldstein, 2005; Salisbury et al., 2009). Kim and Goldstein (2005) found that levels of language interest, low ethnocentrism, and low intercultural communication apprehension were significant when trying to predict interest in study abroad.

Their results indicated that females not only had higher levels of language interest than males but also had significantly lower levels of ethnocentrism and intercultural communication apprehension. We predict that consistent with previous research, females will be more willing to study abroad than males.

- H8: *Females are more willing to study abroad than males.*

Program length is often an important factor when deciding whether or not to study abroad. Longer programs often cost more and require students to give up or leave their life behind for an extended period of time. Recently, short-term study abroad programs, which we define as lasting less than a semester, have become more popular, especially among business students (Holland & Kedia, 2003). Research has identified several barriers students face when considering whether or not to study abroad such as the fear of leaving the United States, financial constraints, and perceived or real lack of flexibility within their academic program (Lincoln Commission Report, 2005; Holland & Kedia, 2003; Albers-Miller et al., 1999; Salisbury et al., 2009). Participating in a short-term study-abroad program may allow students to mitigate some of these barriers. For this reason, we predict that students will be more willing to study abroad short-term than long-term.

- H9: *Students are more willing to study abroad on short-term programs than on long-term programs.*

As mentioned before, studying abroad can be an intimidating experience. Students have to adapt to new places, cultures, and people all at once. Doing this in an area that speaks the same language might alleviate some of the fear. Accordingly, we hypothesize that students will be more willing to study abroad in Arabic-speaking locations than non-Arabic-speaking locations.

- H10: *Students are more willing to study abroad in Arabic-speaking locations than non-Arabic-speaking locations.*

For many students, participating in a study abroad program means leaving their home country for the very first time. This is not only uncomfortable, but can also be viewed as threatening (Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005). Many Arab parents think the U.S. is too far to send their children. Additionally, many Arab parents are reluctant to have their children, especially their daughters, exposed to American culture and society (Rugh, 2002). For these reasons, we predict that students will be more willing to study abroad in geographically close countries than geographically far countries.

- H11: *Students are more willing to study abroad in geographically close countries.*

Students often study abroad with the hopes of visiting cities or attractions of which they have only seen pictures. Usually, these are located in larger cities. Larger cities offer advantages to study abroad students that rural locations cannot, such as more extensive technology, communications, and transportation infrastructure. Business students, in particular, may be attracted by the important centers of global commerce. Due to this, we predict that students will be more willing to study abroad in urban locations than rural locations.

- H12: *Students are more willing to study abroad in urban locations than rural locations.*

Traveling across the globe can be a very intimidating experience for students. Universities often provide the opportunity to study abroad with faculty or other students of the home university. This may help alleviate the fear of traveling to a foreign country. Study abroad professionals agree that students are more likely to participate if a business faculty member from their home university taught the courses while abroad (Holland & Kedia, 2003). Due to this, we predict that students will be more willing to study abroad with others than alone.

- H13: *Students are more willing to study abroad with others than alone.*

## METHODOLOGY

### Sample

A survey instrument (see page 16 for sample questions) was distributed to business students at a private Kuwaiti university in 2011. The university has approximately 3,600 students. 135 usable survey responses were received from students including responses from freshman-, sophomore-, junior-, senior-, and graduate-level students. 80 percent of respondents were business majors, 19 percent were various other majors, and less than 1 percent was unknown. Respondents' majors can be broken down into 51 percent Marketing, 10 percent Accounting, 8 percent Management, 5 percent MIS, 1 percent Finance, 22 percent Other and less than 1 percent was unknown. 28 percent of respondents were males, 71 percent were females, and less than 1 percent was unknown. Only the responses of Kuwaiti citizens were examined for this research, though surveys were collected from 20 non-Kuwaiti citizens as well. The average age of respondents was 21.9 years and the range was from 17 to 29 years old.

### Survey Instrument

The survey instrument used was composed of four sections. The first section addressed socio-biographical factors and demographics such as age, gender, personal relationships, major of study, and highest degree obtained. The second section asked respondents to rate their

proficiency in foreign languages on a scale of zero to five; zero representing no ability and five representing a fluent and native speaker. Additionally, the second section included questions of quantity such as "How many foreign countries have you visited?" or "How many of your close friends have lived, studied, or worked abroad?" The third section questioned agreement with items related to willingness such as "I am willing to study abroad short-term (less than a semester program)." Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a specific statement using a six-point Likert scale as following: 1= strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=somewhat disagree, 4=somewhat agree, 5=agree, and 6= strongly agree. A six-point scale was used, which prevented neutral responses. The questions were clear and unambiguous, and therefore suitably measured with single-item measures (Wanous, Reichers & Hudy, 1997). The fourth section of the survey instrument included four open-ended questions asking students to list countries in which they had previously lived, worked, studied, or visited. Before being administered to the Kuwaiti students, the survey was administered to American and International MBA students at an American university, who were graduate assistants to test its reliability and validity. Questions were deemed easy to understand and straightforward. Sample questions are shown on page 8.

### Sample survey questions

#### Section 1

<b>Which best describes where you were mostly raised?</b>	Rural / Small town / Medium town / Large city
<b>Your current class standing:</b>	Freshman / Sophomore / Junior / Senior / Graduate / Post-Graduate
<b>Highest degree you have already completed:</b>	None / High School / Associate / Bachelors / Masters / Doctorate
<b>Undergraduate major:</b>	Accounting / Finance / Management / Marketing / MIS / Other
If you circled Other, please indicate major: _____	

#### Section 2

<b>Please circle appropriate numbers below to indicate your proficiency in these languages (0=No ability at all, 1=basic ability, 2=moderate ability, 3=high ability, 4=fluent non-native speaker, 5=fluent native speaker)</b>						
Spanish	0	1	2	3	4	5
French	0	1	2	3	4	5
German	0	1	2	3	4	5
Chinese	0	1	2	3	4	5
English	0	1	2	3	4	5
Other (1)	0	1	2	3	4	5
Other (2)	0	1	2	3	4	5

<b>Please circle the number on the right that best answers the following questions</b>						
How many of your close family members have lived, studied or worked abroad?	0	1	2	3	4	5+
How many of your close friends have lived, studied or worked abroad?	0	1	2	3	4	5+
How many times have you studied abroad short-term (less than a semester)?	0	1	2	3	4	5+
How many times have you studied abroad long-term (a semester or more)?	0	1	2	3	4	5+

#### Section 3

<b>Please indicate how much you disagree or agree with the following statements.</b>	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	International experience is beneficial for professional and career development	1	2	3	4	5
International experience is beneficial for personal development	1	2	3	4	5	6
I am willing to study abroad short-term (less than a semester program)	1	2	3	4	5	6
I am willing to study abroad long-term (semester or longer)	1	2	3	4	5	6

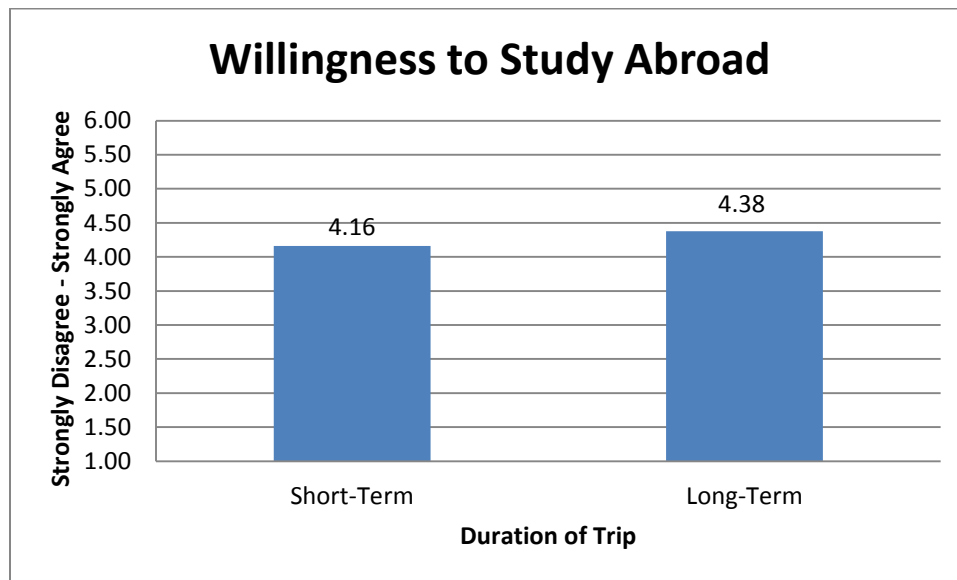


## EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

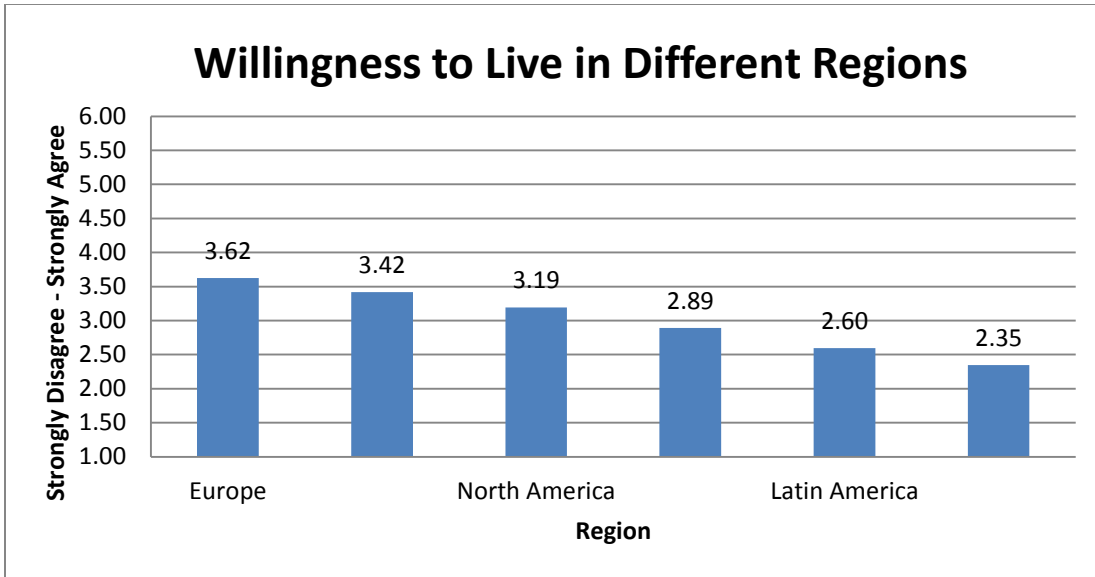
Empirical analysis is ongoing but initial findings are interesting and revealing. As shown in Figure 1, Kuwaiti students show a slight preference for long-term study abroad programs rather than short term programs. This contrasts with findings by Hackney et al. (2012), who found that American students exhibited a statistically significant preference for short-term programs. Figure 2 shows that Kuwaiti students prefer to study in Europe, Australia, and North America more than Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Figure 3 shows a preference to live in countries where Arabic is not the dominant language. Figures 4 and 5 shown language proficiencies of the Kuwaiti students. Most respondents are fluent in more than one language, with European languages being the most common second languages spoken

by respondents. Figure 6 shows that respondents are equally open to living in geographic locations that are close or distant. Figure 7 shows a strong preference for urban, as opposed to rural, locations, and Figure 8 shows a strong preference for living or studying abroad with others as opposed to going alone. Responses described in Figures 7 and 8 are consistent with Hackney et al. (2012) but responses described in Figures 3, 4, 5, and 6 are in contrast to findings for American students (Hackney et al., 2012). These findings are interesting, and ongoing statistical analysis is being conducted to determine the degree of support or lack of support that is provided for all of the hypotheses presented in the theory section of this paper.

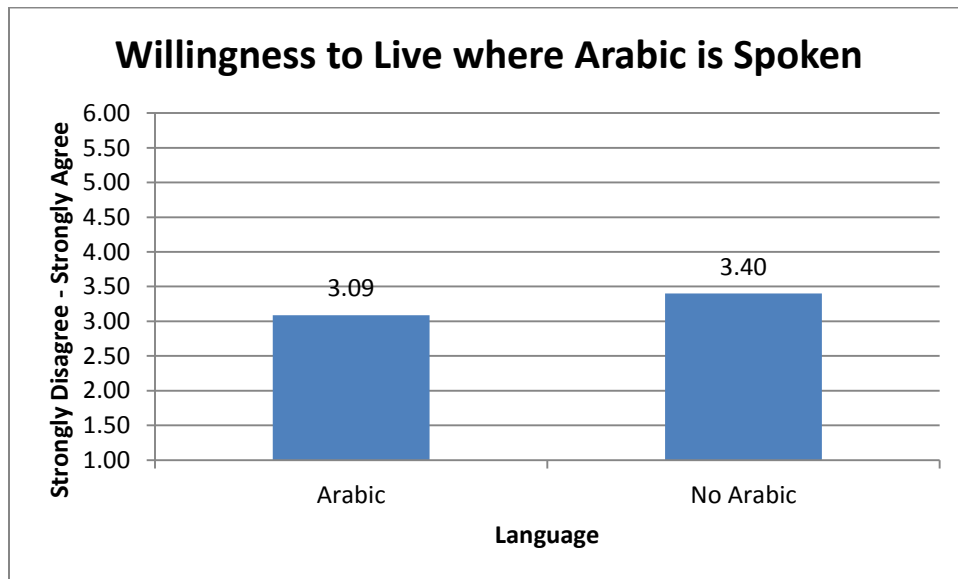
**Figure 1: Kuwaiti Student Willingness to Study Abroad**



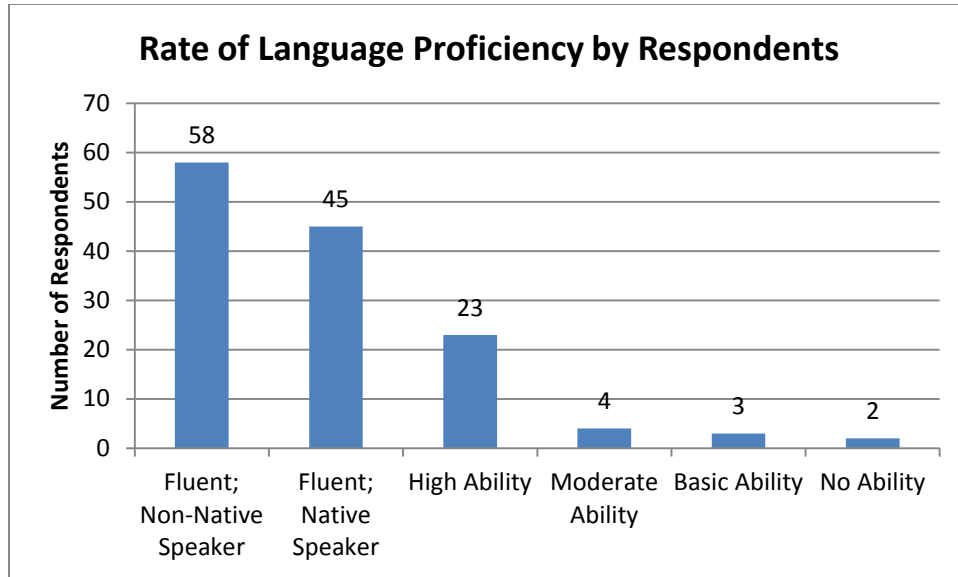
**Figure 2: Kuwaiti Student Willingness to Live in Different Locations**



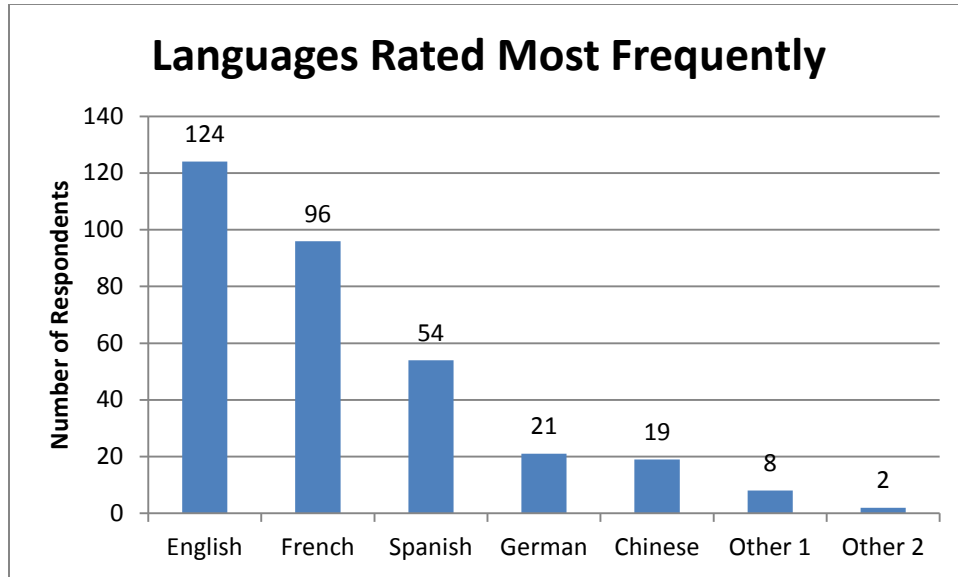
**Figure 3: Willingness to Live Where Arabic is Spoken**



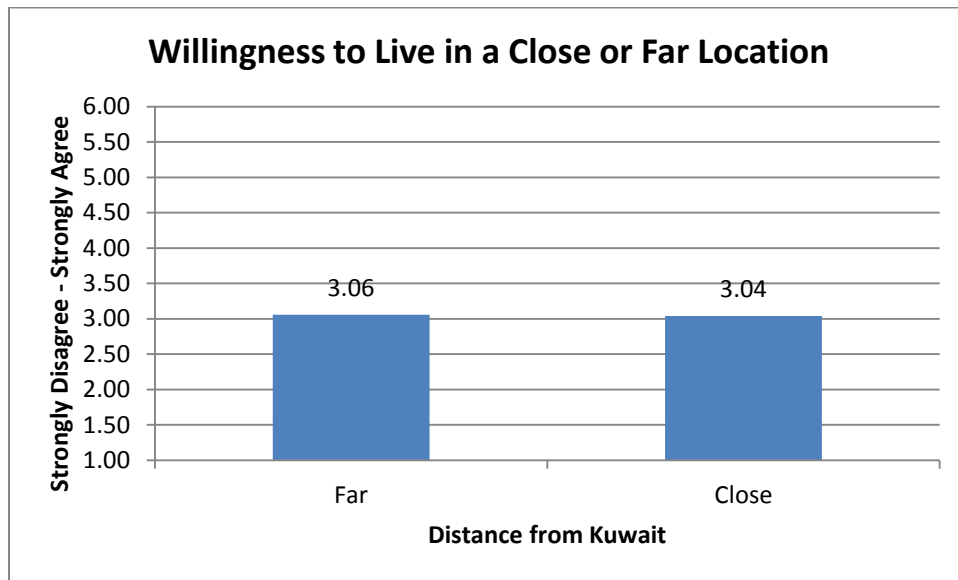
**Figure 4: Rate of Language Proficiency by Respondents**

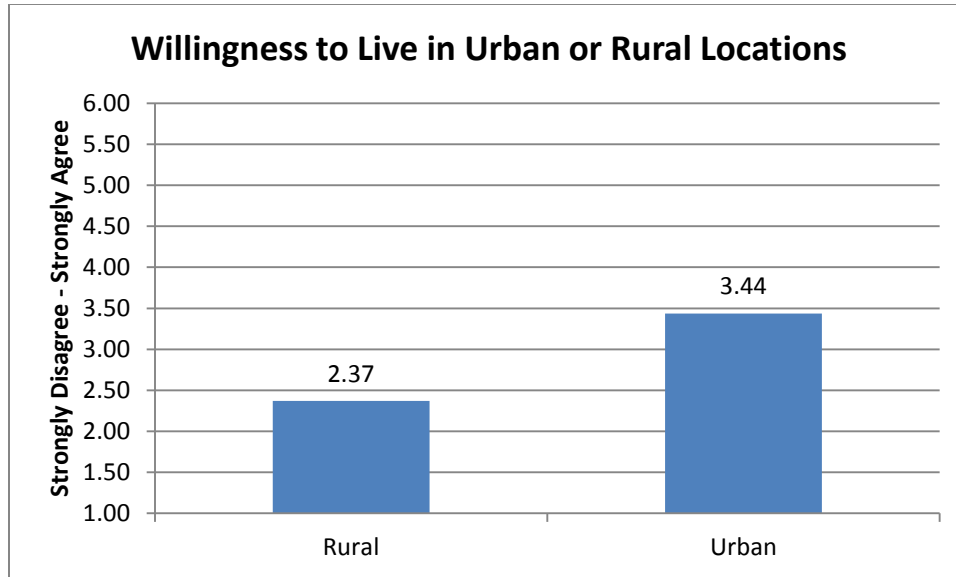
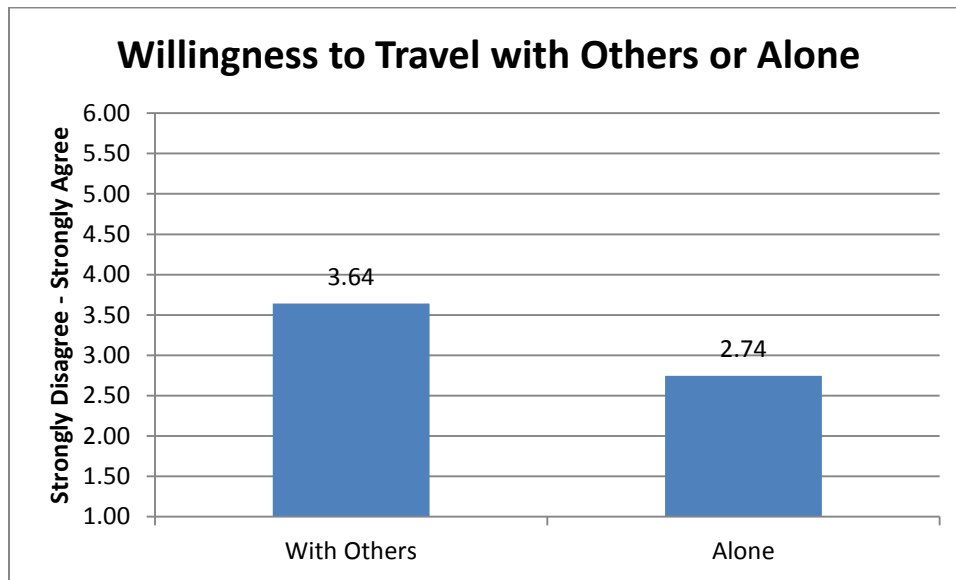


**Figure 5: Languages Rated Most Frequently**



**Figure 6: Willingness to Live in a Geographically Close or Far Location**



**Figure 7: Willingness to live in Urban Versus Rural Locations****Figure 8: Willingness to Travel with Others Versus Travel Alone**

## **DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

The choice to study abroad is influenced by a multitude of situational and personal factors. Study-abroad participation is of high interest to U.S. and foreign institutions in light of the growth of higher education in developing nations and the slight decline in some developed markets due to population and technological shifts. Our preliminary findings indicate that Kuwaiti students prefer to study in Europe and locations with an Anglo-European heritage. Additionally, Kuwaiti students prefer urban locations and prefer to study abroad with others who are familiar or close to them. These findings are interesting, and in line with findings for American students. Other findings are quite different from previous studies' findings about American students. In particular, Kuwaiti's do not seem to be bothered by geographic distance as Americans are, they indicate a clear willingness to study abroad long-term, and Kuwaiti students have more developed abilities in second languages.

Since there is disagreement among scholars as to the appropriate or best length of time to study abroad in order to realize benefits, and since Kuwaiti students seem more willing to study abroad long-term than American students, it would be interesting to study in greater detail the impacts of long- versus short-term study abroad programs for business students from different countries. Short-term programs are very popular in the U.S. but Kuwaiti's indicate a preference for long-term programs. Other interesting areas for continued investigation are the differences for men versus women in the Middle East versus the West. American women are more willing and likely to study abroad than American men. This study is still investigating differences between Kuwaiti men and women.

## **AUTHORS**

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