

In the spring of 2016, I completed a research project as part of my College Park Scholars: International Studies program. In my study, I attempted to determine why women consistently study abroad at higher rates than men. This gender gap was something I had noticed throughout my own travel experiences. I received assistance in my study from two of my Scholars teaching assistants, whom I had worked with previously on a separate study. To complete my study, I wrote, distributed, and analyzed a short social survey. I also used digitally available secondary sources, which I gathered through the UMD Libraries database and some popular sources. Through my study, I learned about designing a research project from start to finish, writing and analyzing a social survey, critically thinking about data findings to reveal unexpected results, and writing a scholarly journal style research report. Looking back, I would have liked to have distributed my survey earlier in the semester to possibly get more responses. The UMD Library could greatly assist undergraduates in future projects by providing resources to gather primary source data, which can be expensive, inefficient, and inadequate without proper support.

To finish my College Park Scholars program, I was required to complete a “Capstone” project. Of the options available to me for the project, I chose to pursue a research study for three reasons: (1) I had built up some analytical skills through two courses on research methods, both of which I found very interesting; (2) I had recently learned more about the research process by working with my teaching assistant’s from Scholars on a study they were working on; and (3) I had a research question that I wanted to answer.

My research question (“why do women study abroad at higher rates than men?”) came from travel experiences I have had throughout my life, during which I was always in the minority as a man. Throughout college I often studied the value of traveling abroad, which I spoke about at a “Terp Talks” showcase. Knowing the immense value of traveling abroad, I was curious as to why so many men passed up study abroad, an easy opportunity to travel.

To begin the study, I developed a theory that men study abroad at lower rates because they see study abroad as an “un-manly” thing to do. In order to inform and reinforce this theory, I looked for peer-reviewed, scholarly sources through the UMD Libraries WorldCat database, as well as a few popular sources found through Google. The only popular sources I used featured interviews with experts on study abroad, or with school administrators that work in study abroad. These real life accounts helped complement the academic sources I used.

I looked for secondary sources specifically on: the history of study abroad; other studies completed on study abroad; and the influence of male social pressure. While I found some sources by searching the WorldCat database directly, I found many by looking at the bibliographies of relevant studies, as well as the “cited by” function that accompanies some papers. Doing so led me through the web of existing and relevant literature.

In addition to my review of secondary sources, I also collected and analyzed primary data through the use of a social survey. I was aided in this effort by my teaching assistants in College Park Scholars: Felipe Westhelle and Joe Braun. They first helped me learn how to design and complete a survey research project by graciously allowing me to assist them with their own study in the fall of 2015. For my study, they gave me guidance on the technical aspects of data gathering, cleaning, and analysis. More details on my survey itself can be found in the included research report.

Through the research process, I learned about: designing a survey; collecting, cleaning, and analyzing primary data; following a “literature web” by searching through bibliographies and “cited by” links; working independently on a long-term project; writing a scholarly journal style report; and thinking critically to understand unexpected findings. I believe that the quantitative skills and critical thinking I developed and demonstrated through my study make me an attractive candidate for many jobs, both inside and outside of academia. I also believe that the proven quality of my writing, and ability to work independently, are basic qualifications that can apply in any job. Last summer I used the skills I learned and practiced through this study, when I worked with a professor in the Geography Department to analyze social surveys taken from poaching villages in Mozambique. I was able to work independently and efficiently due to my research experience.

Looking back on my study, a regret is not distributing my survey early enough in the semester, or to a wide enough sample. With a larger and more heterogenous sample I could have possibly published my results. Moving forward, I hope to retest my survey on a bigger sample. I also hope to test a related survey, looking specifically at one element of my theory.

The UMD Library could assist students in their research by providing resources to help collect or access primary data. Collecting survey data is painstaking and expensive, often to a point of being out of reach for undergraduates. To help, the UMD Library could provide: funding for students to collect survey responses; opportunities for student surveys to be distributed to other students; access to existing collections of survey data (assuming proper CITI training and approval, if need be); or access to data specifically collected for the use of UMD undergraduates.

Completing an independent research study was a gratifying, interesting, and educational experience. I gained and demonstrated important skills, and felt real satisfaction in carrying out an experiment from its conception to results. My experience has inspired me to pursue research opportunities both inside and outside of academia, and I will complete an additional undergraduate study for my honors senior thesis. I am grateful for the mentorship of my teaching assistants, and for the resources provided by the UMD Library. As suggested above, though, I think the UMD Library could provide a great service by making available resources specifically aimed at primary data collection, and I would love to help further brainstorm ways to make that happen.