



Short-Term Study Abroad Experiences of University Students in the US

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Abstract. Around the globe, nations have become more interconnected and increasingly intercultural and individuals must be able to efficiently deal with cultural differences at universities or colleges, at work, or in their private lives. The aim of this study is to *analyze* how students experience the process of intercultural adjustment in this short-term study abroad program. A qualitative case study design was *conducted* to understand the adjustment of students from Global Village 2018 edition. Fifteen semi-structured interviews with 19 open-ended questions were *carried* out. The students' cross-cultural adjustment experiences started with a sense of enthusiasm and overwhelm for diversity, followed by a *frustrating* period where they were supported to adjust and progressively adapted to the *Global Village* environment. Three main phases were found: (a) Excitement and *Disorientation*; (b) Frustration and Adaptation; and, (c) Integration. The students' process of adjustment was mostly symmetrical but found differences regarding the emotion predominance depending on the nationality as related to cross-national cultural dimensions.

Keywords: Intercultural Adjustment · Intercultural Communication · Study Abroad · Higher Education

1 Introduction

Around the globe, nations have become more interconnected and increasingly intercultural, presenting challenges for countries, academia, and the corporate world leading to an age of cultural dynamism [1–3]. Individuals must be able to efficiently deal with cultural differences at universities or colleges, at work, or in their private lives [3–5]. Intercultural, or cross-cultural, competence is a crucial skill-set in the academic and professional arena [6]. Increasing globalization and demands from well-prepared graduates have had a significant impact and influence on higher education and have catalyzed study abroad programs [7, 8]. In recent years, these programs, rather than pursuing a degree in another country, have become a more common practice among international students from all across the globe, targeting applicants who have had no previous international

travel or lack funds for extended study abroad experience [9–12]. Study abroad is an important component of the U.S. College Curriculum Internationalization Movement and is a powerful resource for cultivating global, international, and intercultural skills [13].

In higher education, research centered on student achievement and program effectiveness are still in early stages; a lack of uniformity in its structure difficult to find a one-size-fits-all assessment [8, 14, 15]. Even though this is a relatively new trend, previous findings in the discipline have shown that (a) the power of studying abroad comes from its unique ability to provide students with challenges in the emotional and intellectual sphere [16, 17]; and, (b) it is not enough to send students to study abroad without pedagogical strategies focused on intercultural effectiveness [10, 15, 18].

Since empirical research on short-term study abroad and their adjustment experience does not confirm their effect on student intercultural development, the current study seeks to provide more insight from a qualitative view of the participant's experience of the Iacocca Global Village for Future Leaders, an innovative immersive five-week intercultural learning program at Lehigh University (Pennsylvania, United States). For more than 30 years, Iacocca Institute programs have hosted participants from more than 150 countries. The Institute is part of the Office of International Affairs at Lehigh University [19], recognized among the U.S.'s premier research universities and located in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania [K. Mendez, personal communication, October 8, 2020]. The Global Village brings university students and professionals from around the world, from a variety of backgrounds (cultural, social, economic, generational and professional) to empower the next generation of global leaders. In this program, a group of highly diverse students go through a 5-week immersion experience where there is no "host culture", but rather a learning environment where they are "hosts", as well as "guests". This study therefore addresses the following research question: How did students experience the process of intercultural adjustment in this short-term study abroad program?

2 Methodology

An interpretative framework of social constructivism that emphasizes on developing subjective meanings of human experiences is adopted [20]. It was used to develop a pattern of meaning of the students' experience in the program since the case under study is a very complex and multifaceted experience [20–22]. Qualitative approach has been adopted to have a detailed understanding of participants' personal experiences during the five-week immersion experience [20, 21]. A case study design was conducted [23, 24] to understand the adjustment of students in the short-term study abroad program: The Global Village for Future Leaders.

The study was conducted among students from Global Village 2018 edition [19] which had 61 enrolled participants -who call themselves "Villagers"- from 36 countries and 4 continents aged from 18 to 45 years old [K. Mendez, personal communication, September 29, 2020]. A purposeful sampling size of 15 students was used [20, 24] until the researcher reached data saturation [25]. The sample included one respondent per country -Azerbaijan, China, France, Greece, Hong Kong, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Morocco, Pakistan, Peru, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Sierra Leone, and South

Africa- and varied across attributes of gender (Female: 9; Male: 6), age (21 to 32 yrs.), and the students' majors ranged from engineering to communications, medicine, accounting, political science, culinary arts and management.

The main qualitative data collection approach was semi-structured interviews with 19 open-ended questions focusing on (a) the student's perception of their experiences during the program, and (b) how the program design elements influenced the process. The interview guide was validated in the field to identify unclear or ambiguous statements [20, 24]. The interviews were carried in English and took from 30 to 60 min. Synchronous online in-depth interviews were conducted via computer-mediated communication through a secure online application. All students received an explanation of the procedures followed and the purposes of the study as well as the measures taken to preserve the confidentiality of their responses. The rights of individual participants to self-determination, privacy and dignity was always respected [26]. An alphanumeric code was used to identify participants as follows: Participant Number, Sex, Age, City, Country (P01, Male, 21, Wenzhou, China). Thematic analysis was used to define categories and themes in line with the research question across the data [27, 28].

3 Results and Discussion

The students' cross-cultural adjustment experiences started with a sense of enthusiasm and overwhelm for diversity, followed by a frustration period where they were supported to adjust and progressively adapted to the Global Village environment. Three main phases were found as experienced by the students:

3.1 Excitement and Disorientation Phase

When participants received an acceptance notification that they would attend the program, they experienced feelings of nervousness and excitement until their arrival in the US. The first phase of students' experience is characterized by the enthusiasm and uneasiness generated upon program start. It begins before arriving at the campus, provides a peak of excitement, and persists until the challenges of living and/or working are intense and move students to the next phase. Similarities can be found with the first phase of the W-Curve model, the tourist phase, as people entering this new country (in this case, educational environment) believe that (a) attending was a very good decision; and, (b) it is an exciting adventure despite they might feel anxious on how to interact with others [29–31]. The W-curve model is an emotional pattern that occurs when a person experiences culture shock.

I didn't know what to expect, like how it would be. It was very scared of what was going to happen but at the same time excited to know. (P07, Female, 25, Athens, Greece)

However, the emotions predominance varies in the interviewees depending on the nationality. A tendency for anxiety as a predominant feeling was identified towards European and Asian participants whereas the Latin American and African tend to have excitement as a predominant emotion. This result is in line with the Hofstede's culture

dimensions, since American and African countries with weaker uncertainty avoidance tend to feel tolerance and curiosity for diversity whereas Central and Eastern European Countries with strong uncertainty avoidance tend to suffer from higher stress and anxiety when faced with ambiguity [32–34].

I was hype... very excited. Even though I never saw people from all these countries or didn't know where in the map they were, I knew I was going to be all right. (P05, Male, 23, Bayamon, Puerto Rico)

The feeling of confusion and disorientation before arrival was higher in the students who had no prior travel experience and lower in the ones who had visited the USA before for tourism or other academic program. Students highlighted that in this specific program, they felt that they were left on their own to figure things out until they got to campus and a faculty picked them up from the bus station. No pick-ups at main airport or no mediation amongst their initial encounters, made students felt overwhelmed, confused and excited, which according to Engle and Engle [16] is “the heart of a successful sojourn”. Upon arrival, the initial impression for most students was the tremendous diversity found in residential common areas (lounges, kitchens, bathrooms, hallways, etc.). All students, regardless of nationality, reported feeling surprised and overwhelmed. Language was identified as a big stressor before and during the first encounters. This result was in line with previous studies [30, 35].

When I first arrived, I was confused, too many things going on... I've never been part of such a thing and I knew I was going to meet people from all over the world and share experiences with all of them. I was excited but also nervous... a little anxious about the first time when I would have to speak English. (P01, Male, 21, Wenzhou, China)

I was so stressed [about getting to campus] ... I was at the airport and needed cash to buy the bus ticket but didn't know the name for an ATM [automated teller machine] (...) Finally, a kind guy who worked at the airport took me to an ATM (P02, Male, 24, Paris, France)

The start of the daily coexistence – academic and social life - offers students a valuable opportunity to test the ideas learned in their cultural context about other nationalities. This has a relevance at the cognitive and relational level and at the same time reduce the tension to interact with classmates regardless of their nationality. Almost all respondents admitted being surprised when contrasted preconceived notions of certain nationalities and highlighted how media shapes the reality you believe in and how they took this opportunity to contrast those ideas with real people. Three major groups of students were evidenced: (a) a majority who recognized they arrived with many stereotypes and how their perception changed; a minimum proportion (b) who thought they did not have stereotypes but then realizing they had many – in this group, all have had previous multicultural exposure –; and (c) who did not have any strong stereotypes about others due to previous cultural experiences.

I thought Chinese people were very cold and they just work and study (...) I learned to make a difference between Koreans, Chinese, Japanese, Central Asians like

Tajikistan... Country cultures have influence, but personality traits are so important... We think culture defines the people, but I think it's something ourselves do to become less nervous you know? (P12, Female, 22, Lima, Peru)

Almost all the responses involved the recognition of wider range of people rather than those they had before for world regions as they interacted with people in diverse scenarios and held media responsible in shaping public perceptions and opinions. For the growth of any stereotype, the long-term media exposure, especially television, “cultivates” a conception of social reality in viewers that reflects the content they see on television [36, 37]. In line with participants’ responses, several studies confirm that African, Latino and middle eastern representations don’t portray their realities [38–42].

I think a lot of people had ideas about me or about my country because of some things that had media exposure... Oh is Ebola still in your country? ... A lot of people have many stereotypes about us and how we live... because of how media portrays us... it was difficult sometimes to hear how much misinformation there is. (P09, Female, 25, Freetown, Sierra Leone)

3.2 Frustration and Adaptation Phase

This phase starts when the cultural differences affect the student’s daily life and there is pressure from the program to adapt personally and professionally. It holds two key moments: the frustration peak and the start of adaptation. Students mentioned that their mentoring groups and project guide were key elements to achieve project objectives.

Regarding the personal challenges’ students manifested difficulties getting used to the dorms, living facilities, bathroom sharing, alcohol and religion and reported some incidents with physical contact. One villager did report a difficult situation due to an ongoing controversial cross-national conflict and other students commented about it and how it got solved by the end of the program. Data show that students solved their conflicts. The Culture-Based Social Ecological Conflict Model [43] refers how people use what they know about a conflict to act competently and produce an effective resolution. In line with previous studies [43–45], the students were able to (a) respect the cultural differences, (b) bring conflict-sensitive responses and manage stress.

During my country presentation, I had a tough situation and I felt bad because some students judged me only from the country I’m coming from... step by step I showed them that I’m not what they were told... There was a night were conflicted nations and I sat down and shared our history and we understood how people are the victims... they were my classmates and in the end, we all knew there is good people everywhere. (P11, Female, 29, Tel-Aviv, Israel)

Since the beginning of the program, students are assigned to a support group with an appointed mentor (GV Alumni) for personal goals and experience a positive bonding with peers. During the difficult moments, all students manifested that mentoring – from their project advisor and their group guide – were crucial for developing problem-solving skills for life. Besides, students mentioned that the willingness of the participants to listen and be guided was a determinant of coaching effectiveness.

Global Village wouldn't be the same without the guides. It's probably the most important to have the guides and lead you through the experience ... It taught me to be responsive to my group needs... I am a more thoughtful person after it ... it wasn't until I got my issues that I got to see the value of the guides and how their support makes you grow. (P15, Female, 22, Rabat, Morocco)

3.3 Integration Phase

When students reach the peak of integration, they have – without noticing – established well-developed friendships and the time to return home is close. This phase could be compared to the adaptation phase of the W-curve model [29, 31]. When being asked about their friendships in the program, some students recognize to have searched at the beginning for friends with similar cultural characteristics. Interviewees were able to connect with each other and mentioned that the student-led bonding activities like cooking classes, parties and late-night talks were critical to building strong and worthwhile bonds. When international students feel included, they may go beyond their comfort zones and explore relationships with culturally dissimilar others. Without friends to support them, they would resist their own intercultural adjustment process. Previous research on intercultural friendship [45–47] have found that friendship numbers and satisfaction were significantly related to communicative adaptability and loneliness reduction.

I think my closest friends were not just for cultural affinity but more like personality... no matter where you're from you could be friends and I think that I discovered through them that I had no fear to expose myself like the real me (...) I will never forget a night when we were all outside the dorms... the program was ending, and I saw them all just laughing and soon realized that the problems I thought were only mine (P3, Male, 31, Foggia, Italy)

When asked about their perceived personal growth, all students said they had a personal improvement in their life, and referred themselves to being flexible and open to new experiences. Some of them also mentioned they felt capable and willing to communicate with people from diverse backgrounds. According to the Intercultural Willingness to Communicate scale from Kassing [48], there is a willingness to talk to someone: (a) the subject perceived as different; (b) from a culture the subject knows little about; and (c) who speaks English as a second language. In line with the intercultural competence that is the ability to understand members of other cultures as if they (a) have a sense of belonging to a group of people based on relationship (i.e., family, friends) rather than cultural identity (i.e., people from my culture, people from other cultures); (b) notice similarities in personality between people who belong to totally different cultures; and (c) feel that people from other cultures have valuable things to teach them [49, 50].

I definitely feel I changed like a lot ... you're open minded and you never will look at the world at the same way... I feel like I traveled the whole world in just a summer... through people and it's just inspiring because now the map has a face... Part of your heart is like attached... you walk out of GV and I feel like I can open up and talk to somebody from any part of the world and I know have the capacity to do that. (P10, Female, 24, Santiago, Dominican Republic)

All interviewees affirmed that Global Village meant to them a life-changing opportunity that made them come out as a completely different person. This was an unforgettable and rich experience that they will always remember. The most frequently used words used to describe were unforgettable, family and friends around the world, and personal growth process.

I've changed a lot ... I can't even explain... I came with some expectations for professional growth and left with I got more than I expected... When I came back to my country, I fought everyone because I knew I had a world supporting me... it was until then I got the shock from being here again and I said: wow, I changed. It's incredible how in just a month you can change drastically and when you come back it's hard to stay within that new yourself. (P14, Female, 32, Astana, Kazakhstan)

4 Conclusions

According to the aim of this study, findings show that the students experienced the process of intercultural adjustment in three main phases: (a) Excitement and Disorientation; (b) Frustration and Adaptation; and, (c) Integration. It is of concern that the majority of students perceived the difference in terms of adjustment between those who have had previous exposure to cultural diversity - functioned as a stress reducer in most cases - and those who did not. The students' process of adjustment was mostly symmetrical but found differences regarding the emotion predominance depending on the nationality as related to cross-national cultural dimensions. The biggest stressors identified throughout the experience were: language, real work accountability, and daily life. Overall, participants perceived that the experience was positive, and findings reinforce the importance of developing intercultural competence.

Even though this is a relatively new trend, the power of education abroad comes from its unique ability to provide students with challenges in the emotional and intellectual sphere. For future studies it is relevant point out how the design and structure of the programs play key role in the different impacts of educational experience on students. It is important to study cross-cultural adjustment experiences of specific groups of international students and their coping strategies within their context to enrich the possibilities of improving the programs. Practitioners such as university counselors and community workers should first be able to recognize specific adjustment experiences of different groups of international students and then apply different effective strategies to help these different groups solve their problems.

The study is not without limitations. The results apply to The Global Village for Future Leaders, a short-term study abroad program. Therefore, more studies in others study abroad programs in US as well as in other countries will transfer these findings into larger host contexts.

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