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ABSTRACT

Approximately 500 undergraduate students, representing colleges and universities across the United States, who were about to embark on a semester-long credit-bearing sojourn sponsored by Syracuse University (New York) to one of four locations (London, Strasbourg, Madrid, and Florence) were surveyed about their aspirations and attitudes regarding language, food and health, and adjustment/homesickness. Findings indicated: only three percent of respondents stated that learning the host language was the prime reason for studying abroad; just half of the respondents had a positive attitude toward language acquisition; 59 percent had positive expectations about the host country's food, while 27 percent had negative attitudes; 64 percent had positive expectations concerning matters of health; 80 percent felt positively about adjusting to a new lifestyle and a different academic setting; and homesickness was not expected to be a serious concern. Findings prompted a revision of a 1989 chart by Cornelius Grove which was designed to guide programmers planning an immediate post-arrival orientation in choosing the most pertinent topics. The chart shows when certain concerns become most acute, the complexity of the network of expectations, and the adjustment pattern. Implications for planning student exchange programs are discussed. (JDD)

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What Exchange Programs Should Know about Student Expectations

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Expecting the Worst (or the Best!)
What Exchange Programs Should Know About Student Expectations

Prepared for AFS

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Editor's Introduction

Over the years the AFS Center for the Study of Intercultural Learning has tried to bring to the AFS public the work of high caliber researchers in the intercultural field. After a long interval of silence, I am happy to reintroduce the Occasional Papers in Intercultural Learning series with the work of Professor Beulah Rohrlich. Recently retired from her post in the Department of Speech Communications at Syracuse University, Dr. Rohrlich still contributes her research efforts to the university's International Programs. She is also active in the International Society for Intercultural Education, Training, and Research (SIETAR), the organization she led as president from 1982 to 1984.

In this number, Dr. Rohrlich reports some of the findings from a major research effort that she and Dr. Judith N. Martin, Associate Professor, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, conducted in 1987-88. The project was to investigate the expectations of American students participating in Syracuse University's Semester Abroad programs to Europe. Like AFS programs, Syracuse University's International Programs provide offer an international, educational experience, but with some important differences. The students are older than most AFS students, and they do not always live with volunteer host families.

This research was partially funded by the Division of International Programs Of Syracuse University and the Office of International Education at the University of Minnesota.

Expecting the Worst (or the Best!)
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by Beulah F. Rohrlich
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Educators—and indeed the public—have believed for many years that an overseas study program was "an enriching experience" for the participants. Exactly what was meant by that descriptive term was rarely explained. Nor has there been empirical research on the specific gains accruing from such sojourns. It has become one of the educational axioms of our day.

Certainly a large part of the learning value of study sojourns is seen in the returning individuals themselves—their sense of self-confidence and maturity in addition to their expanded knowledge. Their gain is linked to the expectations they held at the start.

Explorations of participant expectations has begun to yield an understanding of the nature of these concerns and interests.[1] By delineating the kind of concern, its immediacy and its relationship to other expectations, programmers can be better attuned to meeting the long range goals of a sojourn abroad. For example, one assumes that embarking sojourners hold positive expectations regarding the venture, and that they have ample reason to believe their expectations will be fulfilled in the course of their program. But is this true? And do they also hold *negative* expectations? If so, what are they? If expectations are not explored, the overall success of a program may be in jeopardy, unknowingly, from the start.

Similarly, an *absence* of expectations may indicate lack of commitment without which the sojourners cannot achieve success because they lack the necessary motivation and direction. Shared expectations permit both sojourners and programmers to understand the overall goals of the experience and the avenues for reaching that end. Ideally, such knowledge and insight can provide a team approach to realizing goals using a step-by-step sharing of responsibility. Therefore, exploring expectations can yield a valuable source of information as yet untapped.

Administering student sojourn programs has never been an easy matter. In times of economic depression, political unrest, and changing undergraduate academic interests, the task becomes more difficult. Designing, implementing and managing student sojourns is a formidable undertaking. Other academic research tells us that what an individual anticipates has a direct bearing on what he or she experiences. By understanding student pre-departure expectations, we can better develop pre-departure orientation programs and deal with crises that may occur during the sojourn. Whatever we can learn about student expectations is valuable, especially about their hopes and concerns for the program to which they have already committed themselves.

To this end we surveyed approximately one thousand U.S. undergraduate students representing colleges and universities across the country. They were about to embark on a semester-long credit-bearing sojourn sponsored by Syracuse University to one of four locations: London, Strasbourg, Madrid, and Florence. Most of the students were in their late teens or twenty years old. Approximately five hundred were willing to fill out the one-page (two-sided) questionnaire. While this 50% response is better than average for questionnaire research, it

reveals the less than enthusiastic interest of the would-be sojourners in sharing their attitudes or in furthering sojourn research; it is impossible to know which. The students were asked specifically about their concerns and expectations in the following areas: housing, coursework, food, climate, language, health, money, homesickness, unfamiliar currency, adjusting to a new culture, extracurricular travel interests, and on-site transportation. The approach was informal: "Please take time to jot down specific positive or negative expectations, i.e., things you are anxious about or things you are eager for." These categories were chosen on the basis of earlier research identifying these as significant concerns at the start of student sojourns.[2] The results of the quantitative analysis (in which the degree of concern measured on a numerical scale was computed) has been reported elsewhere.[3] The qualitative responses—the comments of students in their own words—were also analyzed.

Here we want to focus on just a few areas in which student expectations may have an impact on the outcome of an international program.

Our findings prompted a revision of a 1989 chart by Grove[4] which was designed to guide programmers planning an immediate post-arrival orientation in choosing the most pertinent topics. We have revised that chart to reflect the pre-departure concerns and fears expressed to us. It shows when the concerns become most acute, the complexity of the network of sojourn expectations, and the adjustment pattern (see figure on page 5). "Concentric-Circles Approach to Helping New Sojourners" shows three ellipses moving from the innermost (depicting immediate concerns) to outer ones (depicting those of concern at later stages of the sojourn). Outside these ellipses are more advanced needs in areas of learning, satisfaction, and growth. This is also the area of the most abstract concerns, those that sojourners may not be aware of, like nonverbal communication, humor, deep personal relations, and the cultural values in a host country.

In addition to blocking out the relevant concerns in a temporal way, the chart also shows relationships among the areas. For example, in moving from immediate concerns about personal safety, students then need to know their immediate vicinity, then the broader community, and finally, at the outer ring, their concerns proceed to the more abstract learning of political and social understanding. Therefore, we have expanded the chart and modified it to indicate how student expectations affect participant thinking about concerns in a very realistic way.

What we can learn from the aspirations and attitudes expressed by these students regarding three broad areas: language, food and health, and adjustment/homesickness? Students responding to the survey were not expected to comment on each question, so these areas that prompted voluntary comment are worthy of attention. The total number of responses, for example, 350 on food, shows the high degree of student interest in wanting to offer a comment. The comments also reflect what the students wanted to tell us, not what the researchers necessarily wanted to gather. Therefore, we were able to gain some insight into the expectations of the students themselves as they embarked on their sojourn abroad.

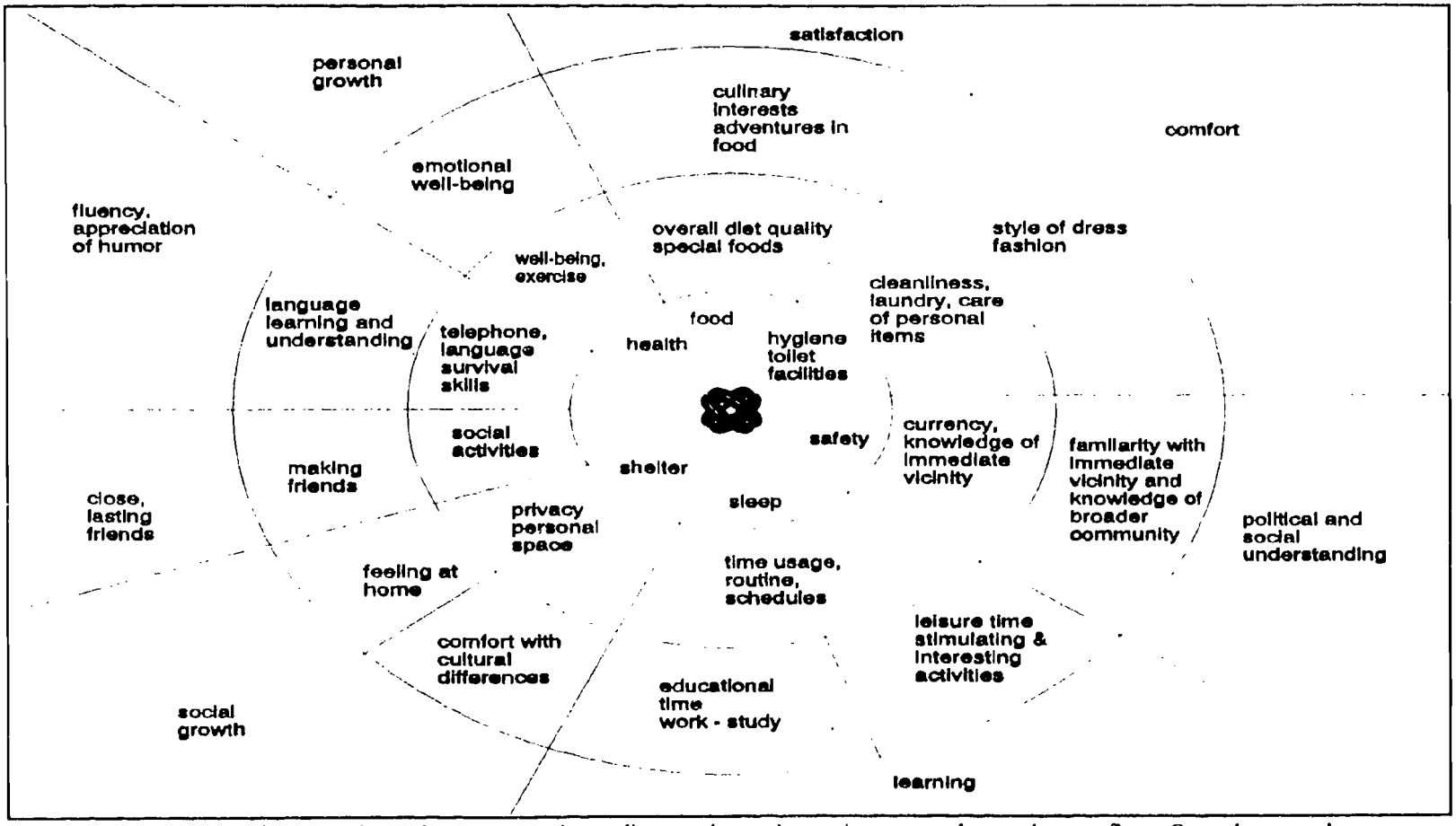
The students' descriptions of their concerns and expectations seemed to fall into three categories: positive, negative and neutral. Positive statements focused on the potential of the overseas experience, e.g. "I can hardly wait to eat French food" whereas negative statements focused on the "problems" anticipated, e.g. "My French has been classroom. I hope my six years will pay off." Neutral statements were those embodying both positive and negative aspects—those lacking in focus, or non sequiturs, e.g. "Extracurricular travel will be expensive and timeful, but also fun." Percentages were obtained from the total number of actual responses to each of the categories named. Responses were also categorized as general or specific, so each statement of expectation yielded a total of five possible categories.

One of the most interesting correlations that can be made between our findings and the Grove chart concerns foreign language acquisition, which will be discussed first.

Language

Very few respondents (3%) stated that learning the host language was the prime reason for studying abroad, although this is the traditional

Concentric-Circles Approach to Helping New Sojourners



The needs in the inner circle are those that are most immediate to the student sojourner and must be met first. Once these needs are met, the next ring of needs should be addressed.

Adapted from Cornelius Grove, *Orientation Handbook for Youth Exchange Programs* (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1989, p. 124.

rationale found in earlier literature.[5] Our findings support Grove's placement of language in the middle ring (survival language) and outer ring (formal language study). Of the 340 responses describing their expectations about language, 51% were positive, that is, they were looking forward to learning the language of the host country or toward achieving fluency in that language. While very few of the positive responses dealt with specifics (3%), some students expressed a love of the language *per se*. However, we found little expression of earnest student responsibility and commitment to language learning prior to or upon acceptance into an abroad program. In 1984, the *Statement of Recommendations Regarding AFS Program Quality* emphasized the importance of language learning as one of its eleven recommendations, specifically urging that students begin language learning as soon as they are accepted into a program. While one-half our students expressed a generally positive attitude toward learning the new language, we surmise that many students do not follow the AFS advice; hence, the 38% who were anxious or expressed clearly negative expectations regarding competence in the new language. (It is unfortunate that our questionnaire did not ask students how much exposure they already had in the language of the host country.)

This group of negative responses on language fell into either the negative-general or negative-specific category. Students were worried about understanding host nationals and being understood ("I hope my [host] family is patient and helps me.") A few worried about how *soon* they would acquire facility in the language. Some negative-specific statements focused on ability to use the language in connection with local transportation ("It will be difficult to get around.") and in a new classroom environment ("I'm worried about keeping up in classes.") Only one student specifically aired the concern, "I don't want to make a fool of myself." Quite likely, others sensed but did not choose to report the sentiment.

In the neutral category, students stated that they had some language knowledge from school. They hoped it would prove sufficient—or they made comments like "I'm working on it." Neutral reactions constituted 11% of the responses, which if added to the 38% of negative responses will nearly balance the positive 51%

What does this data tell us about language concerns of students going abroad? Just half of them have a positive attitude toward language acquisition. In host nations where the language is not one the students may have studied—or even heard—greater effort needs to be made to allay fears and whet the appetite of sojourning students. Survival language sheets with essential vocabulary and phrases might be distributed before departure and practiced at orientation. This practice would follow Grove's treatment of survival language on the chart. The advisability of an early start in language learning is supported.

More fundamental would be some information about second language acquisition: the experience of those first three months when the mind absorbs the new sounds and patterns like a sponge. Armed with a better understanding of language learning, students might improve their attitude toward learning a new language. In addition, wherever possible host nationals need to be further sensitized to the need for patience where language is concerned. And sojourners need to be assured of that. Supporting institutions or host families cannot expect that all students will progress equally in the host language. Each new sojourner should be seen as an individual within a varying range of familiarity and ability in a second language.

The underlying message is clear: at least half of the students are *not* strongly enthusiastic about the language learning experience ahead of them. Perhaps educators and parents are committed to the value, but almost half the students themselves reflect neutral or even negative attitudes toward a new language prior to their departure to study abroad. Students who have language proficiency at the *start* of the sojourn can profoundly enhance their experience abroad.

Food and Health

Most people have some comment to make about the subject of food when travelling abroad. Students are no different. While Grove's earlier chart included food only under "nourishment" as an immediate need, we have added intermediate and outer ring categories: "overall diet quality, special foods" and "culinary interests, adventures in food" to

reflect the comments students made. For example, "I know Italian food is good and plentiful" and "I'm eager to try all kinds of French cuisine" go well beyond survival needs consideration. Fifty-nine per cent had positive expectations—almost all comments were general rather than specific in nature, like "Looking forward to it". The cuisine of the country was something many welcomed.

However, 14% did express neutral attitudes, ("food is food") and 27% clearly negative ones, ("I'm worried that I won't like it".) These categories deserve scrutiny because they represent more than one quarter of the sample of some 350 qualitative responses. What concerns led students to voice those comments?

For the most part. the negative comments dealt with specific matters such as food allergies and dietary preferences, although these concerns were not raised in significant numbers. Our findings reveal serious concern about the availability of vegetarian food, and following a vegetarian diet. (Thus the addition of "special foods" in the intermediate ring.) If these worries, expressed at the time of departure, are not dealt with in an efficient, substantive way upon arrival, students may be frustrated by their individual efforts to find such foods in a strange city. Moreover, if the program assigns students to live with host families, specific expectations regarding diet should be shared in an effort to achieve the most compatible living arrangement.

These are justifiable concerns, and program planners were concerned that students would not find that type of food, especially if they were housed with a host family. Program planners should realize the seriousness of the matter in the eyes of the students. Granted, there were numerous negative responses that admitted to being "picky eaters" and comments such as "I'm worried about not liking the food." While orientation sessions rarely allow enough time for discussion of food, some attention should be given to introducing the food as part of the overseas adventure, particularly where U.S. students will enter a culture in which bread is not the chief staple. Among the negative and neutral responses were a scattering of concerns regarding weight gain, primarily from women students. From males we found comments like "I hope I get enough [food]', but these were fewer in number.

Overseas sojourn planners cannot be cuisine experts or nutritionist counselors, but the area of food is worthy of more attention than it seems to have been given. Recent literature on U.S. college students' attitudes and behavior regarding nutrition showed that 54% believed maintaining a healthy diet was very important to them; 82% of the 342 students sampled said that their greatest concern was about the amount of fat in their diet.[6] This segment of the U.S. population reflects a national dietary trend that closely follows 1990 dietary guidelines which listed specifically "plenty of vegetables, fruits and grain products"[7] —not all of which are always in abundance during winter months in the homes of host families. In the study by O'Connor in 1991, more than half the students expressed a willingness to pay [the university dining hall] more for such changes. Problematic as they are, sojourner's nutritional concerns (either for reasons of allergy or general health) are bound to increase. Some insight as to daily meal patterns, items frequently found on host family tables, and national dishes might provide a basis for a deeper interest and broader acceptance of the new cuisine. Further investigation is needed on the matter of dietary restrictions ("I'm a vegetarian") and allergies; these were not rare negative expectations.

One assumes that young people embarking on a European sojourn would be little concerned about matters of health. Is such the case? The 286 responses revealed that 64% chose to make positive statements, anticipating ability to care for themselves or having no health concerns. Only 12% fell into the neutral category, such as "I want to hear information on doctors just in case." The negative responses, both general and specific, accounted for 21%. These fell into two categories: concern about finding quality medical care if necessary, and a number of specific concerns from "I have allergies" to preexisting medical problems (migraines, mononucleosis, kidney stones) that gave rise to apprehension.

Clearly, concerns about health are not uppermost in the minds of student sojourners. But from the 21% who did express themselves, what might be done to further diminish existing concern—

or perhaps that of their parents? Sponsoring organizations might prepare and distribute (prior to on-site meetings) a sheet listing medical services in the host city. Information on dental services would also be helpful, since these facilities vary considerably from country to country. Such information in hand could lessen the pressure on host families (or an on-site office, if one exists) when a health problem develops. It might even prevent some emergencies.

Adjusting to a New Culture and Dealing with Homesickness

In a sense, all the rings of the Grove chart refer to adjustment. He wisely separates immediate vicinity familiarity from extended vicinity and regional familiarity. Students cannot be expected to be aware of such distinctions as they embark, but they are aware of and concerned with the challenge of adjusting to a new lifestyle and a different academic setting. Two hundred eighty-nine responses to this question (60% of the students) made relevant comments. Of those, 80% reflected positive expectations like "I'm looking forward to it" and "It'll be fun and challenging." This finding is not surprising; one would expect students choosing a sojourn abroad to hold a positive attitude toward adjustment which is an inherent part of the experience. Only 9% commented neutrally, "It might take a little time, but I can do it." The small percentage making distinctly negative statements (18%) focused on specific worries that pertained to anticipated living conditions they feared: cold homes, no daily showers, and not enough space—concerns found at the intermediate ring of the chart on page 5.

The majority of qualitative responses in this category reflect a population with a positive outlook, ready to cope with a new culture. Many expressly stated they were looking forward to the challenge. Sojourn organizers clearly made the appropriate selection of students based on these findings, though one cannot prove the positive attitude toward adjustment was a result of successful selection, orientation material, or some other reasons. An examination of orientation material from the standpoint of cultural adjustment might be useful: to what extent is this matter addressed, and how directly? How can the areas in the intermediate ring (cleanliness, survival language, knowledge of immediate, time usage/schedules, special dietary needs, etc.) be addressed during an on-site orientation period? What other resources are available to support students with information in the areas of most immediate concern?

On the one hand, students should be forewarned about the cross-cultural adjustment problems they may face; on the other hand, enthusiastic students should not be frightened or dismayed by the prospect. If selection interviews are used, how much should the interviewer focus on the adjustment question? Finally, there is the matter of expectations matching reality. It is one thing to be positive about adjustment on the eve of departure, but quite another to realize a few weeks after arrival that you are not functioning effectively in spite of your best efforts. Perhaps the wisest procedure would be to *alert* students to the phases of sojourn adjustment likely to be experienced, regardless of their expectations, so that they can recognize and successfully cope with their reactions, both physical and psychological, as they settle into their new environment.

Homesickness is something that many students must face. Although Grove does not include it, per se, on the chart, it can permeate many of the areas in the rings. The attitude toward homesickness is a little similar to seasickness; you try not to think about it if possible. For the most part, students responding to this topic were unconcerned about the prospects (66%) and willing to make some statement to that effect. Three hundred seven commented. Among the majority of positive responses, students wrote that they were used to being separated from family and friends, and some pointed out that a semester abroad was a relatively short sojourn. Others reflected coping skills already operative: "I've brought lots of photos, I'm going to learn to like writing letters."

Among the neutral responses were comments like "It's all part of the trip." No one responded in terms of missing the home *culture*, although we know sojourners often feel they miss the way of life they had come to take for granted. No term exists for missing one's home culture, but that is often the experience. These respondents anticipated nothing of the sort at the start of their

sojourn.

Among the 17% expressing a distinctly negative concern, it frequently took the form of missing a particular person (boyfriends, roommates, and family). A few women were worried about a worsening effect of the sojourn on a personal relationship with a boyfriend, but it is interesting that no males expressed concern about relationships with girlfriends.

While there is no reason to doubt the respondents' veracity on the subject of homesickness, perhaps there is an underlying motivation to sound debonair and confident. Upper level college students may not want to appear concerned about something like homesickness; a self-administered questionnaire cannot ascertain students' honesty in their self-disclosure. Nevertheless, the strongly weighted positive response indicates that in 1991 homesickness was not a primary concern.

Summary

This research attempted to survey what the expectations were for a group of college age students embarking on an academic sojourn. Only selected concerns were investigated, but earlier research showed these were relevant. Findings tell us

- that second language acquisition needs more attention;
- that adjustment to another culture is positively anticipated but not necessarily understood realistically;
- that attitudes toward food are positive, but that the negative concerns of 25% should be explored:
- that some further information supplied regarding health could increase the already positive expectations; and that homesickness is not anticipated as a serious concern.

All in all, our research shows that sojourn planners are doing a reasonably good job selecting and preparing students, but there is room for improvement, practically or philosophically, within each category.

The *Concentric-Circles* chart by Grove, with our modifications, provides clear insight into the diversity, timing, and complexity of expectations and adjustment. Our findings provide further empirical data to add to the field of reentry, and to augment the knowledge we already have on how best to help new sojourners.

NOTES

1. Feather, N. *Values in Education and Society*. (New York: Free Press, 1975).

2. Sell, D.K. Research on attitude change in U.S. students who participate in foreign study experience: Past findings and suggestions for future research. *International Journal of International Relations*. Vol 7 (1983), pp. 131-48; Klineberg, O. & Hull, W.F. *At a Foreign University: An International Study of Adaptation and Coping*. (New York: Praeger, 1979).

3. Martin, J. N. & Rohrlich B. F. "The relationship between study-abroad student expectations and selected student characteristics," Journal of College Student Development, (1991) pp. 32, 39-46; Rohrlich, B. F. & Martin, J. N., "Host country and reentry adjustment of student sojourners. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol 15 (1991), pp. 163-82.

4. As found in Grove, C., *Orientation Handbook for Youth Exchange Programs*. (Yarmouth, ME: The Intercultural Press, 1989), p. 124.

5. Churchill, R., "The Student Abroad." *Antioch Review*, Vol. 18, (1958) pp. 447-54; Goodwin, C. D. & Nacht, M. *Abroad & Beyond: Patterns in American Overseas Education*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

6. Churchill, R., "The Student Abroad." *Antioch Review*, Vol. 18, (1958) pp. 447-54; Goodwin, C.D. & Nacht, M. *Abroad & Beyond: Patterns in American Overseas Education*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

7. O'Connor, J. "Nutrition and college students: Attitudes and Behaviors." *Journal of College Student Development*, Vol. 32 (1991), pp. 267-69.

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