

Study Abroad and Intercultural Coursework: Their Effects on Change in Intercultural Competence

Kathleen G. Rust, Brenda Forster, Alice Niziolek

Elmhurst College

Christine M. Morris

University of Iowa

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to present a model for evaluating whether a study abroad experience increases intercultural competence as well as to examine whether undergraduate students who participated in a study abroad experience and intercultural competence building coursework demonstrate a significant increase in intercultural competence over those who only enroll in a study abroad experience. Sixty students' pre and post scores on the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) were compared. Results show a statistically significant increase in IDI scores after study abroad. They also show that intercultural coursework in conjunction with a study abroad experience can have an impact on individual intercultural development but there was no statistically significant difference in mean change scores between the two student groups.

Keywords: *intercultural development; study abroad; intercultural coursework*

The purpose of the present research is to present a model for evaluating whether study abroad increases intercultural competence as well as to examine whether students who study abroad and participate in intercultural coursework experience a significant increase in intercultural competence over those who only study abroad. While there have been numerous studies that have looked at the effectiveness of one-to-two course interventions designed specifically for students who are preparing to study abroad, very few (if any) studies have looked at the impact a series of courses that students have chosen to complete has on cultural competence. Students' in this study were administered the Intercultural Developmental Inventory (IDI) prior to their study away experience or at the beginning of their intercultural coursework. Seven students completed a series of five courses in addition to the study away experience while 53 participated in study away only. The IDI was administered again once the students returned to compare their pre study away and post study away scores.

Literature Review

In this study, we define intercultural competence as students' ability to adapt to cultural differences while abroad and to generalize those skills after they have returned home. All the authors of this study consider intercultural competence from a developmental perspective that

emphasizes the importance of recognizing that competence increases as one is exposed to numerous competency-building experiences. This process has been described in Bennett's (1986) model of intercultural sensitivity, "...as one's experience of cultural difference becomes more complex and sophisticated, one's potential competence in intercultural relations increases" (Hammer et. al, 2003, as cited by Deardorff, 2009). As one continues to experience cultural differences, a greater potential to develop intercultural competence exists.

One of the integral ways that students can experience these cultural differences is through participation in a study-abroad program. Study abroad programs can take many forms, some leading to more immersion in a host culture and some to less. Students may spend a few weeks abroad or a year. They may be in fairly contained programs in which they and other students from a home institution stay together and have faculty from their home institutions with them, or they may directly enroll in a host institution and live with a family of that culture for the duration of their time abroad. Designed to immerse students in another culture, some of the potential benefits include increased knowledge and understanding of a culture outside of one's own. A number of studies, using a range of different measures, have attempted to discern what the impact of study abroad is on the ability of students to sense and adapt to cultural difference. Many have found changes in students' overall sensitivity to cultural difference, though the results have not been entirely consistent. Engle & Engle (2004) assessed language acquisition and intercultural sensitivity development in relation to a study-abroad experience. Presenting some preliminary evidence from the American University Center of Provence (AUCP)'s study abroad program, differences in development were observed based upon the length of the program.

The initial results indicate that students who study for a full year make significantly more progress in their intercultural competence than those who only study abroad for one semester. Attempting to expand upon the research conducted by Engle & Engle (2004), Medina-López-Portillo (2004) examined the change in participants' intercultural sensitivity in two different language-based programs of differing lengths: a seven-week summer program in Taxco, Mexico, and a 16-week semester program in Mexico City. The results confirm Engle & Engle's (2004) results; more intercultural sensitivity development was observed in students who participated in the 16-week program in Mexico City.

Nevertheless, short-term programs can still make an impact in development. Anderson et al. (2006) examined the effects of a short-term study abroad program on intercultural sensitivity on awareness and response to cultural difference. Results indicate that the study abroad program had a positive impact on the overall development of intercultural competence. Jackson (2009) examined advanced second language students from Hong Kong who took part in short-term sojourns of three to seven weeks after fourteen weeks of on campus preparation. While abroad, they lived with a host family, took literary/cultural studies courses, visited cultural sites, participated in debriefing sessions, and conducted ethnographic projects. As a group, the students experienced a significant average gain in intercultural competence. Thus, even those who have a short-term experience can still improve intercultural competence.

Pederson (2009) examined the impact of curriculum and instruction on intercultural competency. Detailing a year-long study-abroad program, three different conditions existed: 1) students who received an intercultural pedagogy intervention consisting of a perceptual shift activity and a 'meaning-making' exercise facilitated by guided reflection 2) students who did not receive the intervention; 3) control students who studied at home. Results indicate that those students who received an intercultural pedagogy intervention experienced a statistically significant change in intercultural competence. Similarly, Sample (2009) assessed the development of intercultural competence among a group of students who underwent an interdisciplinary approach to intercultural development to prepare for a semester-long study abroad experience. Students in the program are required to have at least four semesters of a modern language other than English, and courses in economics, political science, and anthropology prior to their study abroad experience. The results indicated that this approach, which was designed to help students adapt to cultural changes before studying abroad and after they arrive back home, significantly increased their intercultural competence as measured by the change in their pre and post IDI mean change scores. The mean change score was 19.78 points. The difference between their IDI scores in the first semester and after they had studied abroad was statistically significant at the .000 level.

Vande Berg (2009) summarizes the major conclusions of a four-year study designed to measure the intercultural and second language learning of over 1,300 U.S. undergraduates enrolled in over 60 programs abroad. Specifically, this article attempted to answer the question of whether students learn more effectively when "left to their own devices" (pg. 15) or whether students learn more when educators intervene. Results indicate the latter - when students are enrolled in programs with key design features that are strongly associated with student intercultural learning during their study abroad stay, they experience greater gains in intercultural development, as measured by the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). Students who were merely exposed to a different culture did not have sufficient directed learning opportunities to advance their intercultural learning (Vande Berg, 2009).

These studies all utilized a model of intercultural sensitivity developed by Milton Bennett (1993) and further developed by Mitch Hammer (2009; 2011). In addition, the IDI was used to measure the change in the participants' intercultural development given the intercultural intervention (i.e., study abroad, intercultural course work, etc.). We followed a similar methodology while conducting this research.

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (Bennett, 1993; Paige, et al., 2003; Hammer, 2009; Hammer, 2011) provides a theoretical framework for explaining the reactions of people to cultural difference. The underlying assumption of the model is that as one's experience of cultural differences becomes more complex, one's potential competence in interactions increases (Hammer & Bennett, 2001). The model divides the experience of cultural difference into monocultural (Denial, Polarization, Defense, Reversal), transitional

(Minimization), and intercultural (Acceptance, Adaptation) mindsets. Students with a monocultural mindset assume that their own culture is central to reality. It doesn't occur to them that other people may have different cultural frameworks. If those frameworks are recognized they will typically judge them in light of their own limited understanding of appropriate human interaction.

Figure 1

The Intercultural Development Continuum

The continuum represents a progression from a less complex perception of patterns of cultural difference to a more complex experience and understanding of cultural diversity (Hammer, 2009). In **Denial**, people are simply unaware of cultural differences. This may be the result of isolation, occurring naturally or through deliberate avoidance of difference (Bennett, 1993). People in **Polarization** have recognized that there are cultural differences, but other cultures are seen in fairly simple ways and not as complex as their own culture. Students in this stage of development typically rely on stereotypical interpretations of members of other cultures. People in this stage often sense the need to uphold a hierarchy of cultures as a way of making sense of the perceived cultural difference.

In **Defense** recognition of difference is accompanied by fear and a sense that one's own culture is threatened. From this hierarchical perspective, one's own culture is defined as right, good, and proper, and others are viewed as wrong, bad, and inappropriate. The flip side of Defense is **Reversal**; however, people in Reversal have reversed the hierarchy by defining their own culture as wrong, bad, and inappropriate, and some other culture with which they are familiar as more desirable. Reversal is often believed by the people experiencing it to be quite sophisticated because of its critical gaze on the home culture, but in truth it fails to move beyond the simplistic, polarized understanding of cultures and cultural differences (Sample, 2009). The transitional worldview of **Minimization** is neither fully monocultural nor fully intercultural in orientation. Students who subscribe to a Minimization orientation are generally able to focus on common cultural artifacts (e.g., love of family) but are less effective at understanding important cultural differences (e.g., how love of family manifests itself) (Sample, 2009). Cultural differences are recognized, but deemed as simply 'surface' differences that do not interfere with a real understanding of human relations. Instead, those who minimize cultural difference argue that to really understand people, it is necessary to focus almost exclusively on similarities across cultures.

People with a Minimization orientation may consider surface cultural differences interesting, or even fun (particularly objective culture, visible aspects like food, art, music, etc.), but not relevant to truly understanding other people. They may well view too much consideration of culture difference to be dangerous. They are likely to think that deep down, everyone is pretty

much like them, thus still seeing their own cultural framework as real and natural, and not recognizing the complexity and legitimacy of other cultures (Bennett, 1993; Sample, 2009).

Students, who move beyond the Minimization stage of cultural differences to an **Acceptance** of cultural difference, have moved to an Intercultural Mindset. This represents a fundamental shift in worldview. In these stages, people understand that their own culture is one of many equally complex ways of organizing human behavior. They are tolerant and are comfortable knowing there is no 'right' answer, that beliefs and practices need to be evaluated within a given cultural context. Acceptance does not mean one has to agree with or take on a cultural perspective other than one's own. People in this stage accept the viability of different ways of thinking and behaving (Bennett, 1993). Beyond Acceptance is **Adaptation** to cultural difference. Adaptation is the ability to see the world through the cultural framework of another or other cultures with which the person is familiar and the ability to (increasingly unconsciously) shift into a different cultural frame of reference. They can empathize with the other cultural perspective in order to understand and be understood by members of other cultures (Bennett, 1993).

Purpose

The purpose of the present research is to examine whether study abroad increased intercultural competence and whether students who studied abroad and participated in intercultural coursework experienced a significant increase in intercultural competence compared to those who only studied abroad. The change in intercultural competence is determined by comparing the pre and post individual profile score of each participant.

As discussed above, prior research has found evidence that study abroad experiences do provide opportunities for students to develop intercultural competence (Engle & Engle, 2004; Medina-López-Portillo, 2004; Anderson et al., 2006). Other studies measured intercultural change in students participating in a study abroad experience *and* intercultural coursework (Jackson, 2009; Paige, et al., 2004; Pederson, 2009; Sample, 2009). Therefore, in this study we examine intercultural development in students who study abroad and divide them into two groups: those with intercultural coursework and those without.

Intercultural Coursework

In this study, we considered those with intercultural coursework to be students taking classes toward a minor in Intercultural Studies. The minor requires the completion of 5 courses (20 semester hours) including two half credit intercultural courses (two semester hours each), Introduction to Intercultural Studies and Intermediate Intercultural Studies, which concentrate on developing students' cultural self-awareness and understanding theories such as Critical Race Theory (Harris, 1995) and Hall and Hofstede's value dimensions (Hall, 2001; Hofstede, 1982). The others courses are selected by the student in consultation with the Intercultural Studies chair. Some full credit courses (4 semester hours each) they may select include: Intercultural Communication; Cultural Anthropology; Race, Class and Gender; and Cultural Diversity in Organizations. These courses are open to all students and can also be used to meet a general

education requirement. Students may also apply their study away experience to their degree in intercultural studies. Study abroad students from this program differ in the number of Intercultural Studies courses they each have completed before departure. A course associated with intercultural studies is not required pre-departure.

We used the IDI as the primary measure of intercultural development, similar to its use in the studies described above. We selected it because of its theoretical grounding in Bennett's DMIS and its demonstrated validity and reliability (Paige, 2003; Hammer, Bennett and Wiseman, 2003; Hammer, 2011). To determine if we can replicate the findings of the prior studies, two hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Overall, students who study abroad will demonstrate a positive change score in their Individual Profiles as measured by the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) after studying abroad.

Hypothesis 2: Students who study abroad *and* who enrolled in Intercultural Studies courses will demonstrate a larger change score in their Individual Profile as measured by the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) than those who study abroad only.

Method

The study sample consisted of students from a small (3,500 students) liberal arts institution located in the Midwestern United States who participated in either a four week or a four month (one term) immersion in another culture. A study abroad experience is not required of all students, but it is strongly recommend. Some destinations included Germany, Japan, and India. The students participating in the four-week long courses were accompanied by faculty who traveled with them. Students participating in the four month long (a full semester) were housed in university dormitories and took a full load of courses (four or five 3 to 4 semester hour courses) on a variety of different topics. The IDI is regularly administered to students participating in a four month program.

Using the IDI, data was collected from a total of 60 students, 45 women and 15 men, over an eight year period, 2003 through 2010 to measure their intercultural competence before and after study abroad. Given the relatively small student body, only a handful of students participate in a full semester study abroad experience each academic year. In addition, the institution does not offer many summer study abroad opportunities. Given these limitations, it took us eight years to have enough pre-post matched individual profiles to analyze.

Researchers, instructors and others administering the instrument to participants must attend a two-day qualifying seminar before being allowed to purchase, administer, and analyze the resulting data. The IDI is composed of a 50-item inventory in which participants are asked to rate the level of their agreement with a series of statements about their relationship to and evaluation of cultural difference on a five-point (1 to 5 range) Likert-type scale. Examples of such statements include "*People from other cultures are dishonest compared to people from my*

own culture" and *"All people are basically the same"*. Unfortunately, due to a written agreement with the developers of the IDI, the instrument cannot be copied or provided in an appendix.

Different sets of statements assess participants' orientation toward Denial, Polarization (Defense and Reversal measured as separate scales), Minimization, Acceptance, and Adaptation. Within a developmental model like the DMIS, increased intercultural competence means seeing forward movement through the stages of the model toward an Intercultural mindset, which is reflected in higher scores on the IDI. As a theory-based instrument, the IDI meets the standard scientific criteria for a valid and reliable psychometric instrument (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2009).

Seven students were intercultural study majors or minors who choose to study abroad while 53 did study abroad only. For the ICS students, the IDI was administered in the Introduction to Intercultural Studies class prior to departure and again in the term following their completed study abroad experience. The IDI is administered in this class primarily as a way to assess intercultural learning that takes place for students exposed to intercultural coursework. Students who declare an ICS minor or major were required to take the ICS Capstone course (in their senior year) where a second IDI was administered. The ICS Chair reviews the pre and post scores as one measure to assess the department. The IDI was also used by the International Education Program to measure change in intercultural learning for all students who participated in a long-term study abroad experience, regardless of their major or exposure to intercultural coursework. If an Intercultural Studies student decided to participate in a study away experience later in their coursework, they would inform the International Education administrator. Therefore, the pre IDI scores for ICS students used in this study are the scores they received in Introduction to Intercultural Studies.

To test Hypothesis 1, paired sample t-tests were performed for change scores, that is, for the difference between post-travel and pre-travel IDI scores. To test Hypothesis 2, independent t-tests were performed to compare differences between the study abroad only students and those who also had some intercultural studies course work before departure. These tests compared pre-travel as well as post-travel differences.

Findings

IDI scores from the 60 students who completed the inventory before and after studying abroad ranged from 73.262 to 118.626, with a mean of 98.803 and a standard deviation of 13.132. Post-travel IDI scores ranged from 78.064 to 136.148, with a mean of 102.740 and a standard deviation of 14.680. With scores on the IDI ranging from 55-145, a score of "100" represents the mean or average. A score below 85 indicates that a person is primarily operating in the realm of Polarization; 85-114.99 represents a primary orientation in Minimization, and scores of 115 to 145 indicate Acceptance or Adaptation. Although on average students did not move out of the stage of Minimization, these results nevertheless suggest development in students' intercultural sensitivity, with scores moving closer to the realm of Acceptance.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics (N=60)

Characteristics	N
Gender = Male	15
Gender = Female	45
ICS Coursework = Yes	7
ICS Coursework = No	53

When examining the change in IDI scores after studying abroad, a paired-samples t-test indicated that scores were significantly higher after students had traveled ($M = 102.74$, $SD = 14.68$) than before they had their study abroad experience ($M = 93.80$, $SD = 13.13$), $t(59) = -6.25$, $p < .001$. This confirms Hypothesis 1, that there is a positive and significant difference in change scores in their Individual Profiles as measured by the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) after studying abroad.

Table 2
Participant's Scores on the IDI

IDI Scores	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	s	s²	
Pre-Travel	60	45.364	73.262	118.626	93.803	13.132	172.475
Post-Travel	60	58.085	78.064	136.148	102.740	14.680	215.516

Table 3
Differences in Pre- and Post-Travel IDI Change Scores

Change	S	$\sigma_{\bar{x}}$	Lower	Upper	T	Df	Sig. (2-tail)	
Post-Pre	8.936	11.067	1.428	11.795	6.077	6.254	59	.000

An independent samples t-tests indicated that there were no significant differences in change scores (measured as the difference between the post-study abroad score and pre-study abroad score) between students who were obtaining a minor in Intercultural Studies *and* studied abroad ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 10.06$) versus those who had only studied abroad ($M = 9.44$, $SD = 11.18$), $t(58) = .983$, $p > .05$. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was not supported. However, the sample size for the ICS group was very small and the pre-departure scores were significantly higher for the ICS students ($M = 102.85$, $SD = 5.74$) than for the others ($M = 92.6$, $SD = 1.72$), $t(58) = 2.00$, $p = .05$.

Table 4

Comparison of Change Scores For Students With Intercultural Coursework and Study Abroad to Those with Study Abroad Experience Only

Student Type	<i>n</i>	change	s	$\sigma_{\bar{x}}$
Study Abroad Only	53	9.446	11.182	1.536
ICS + Study Abroad	7	5.071	10.057	3.801

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to determine whether a study abroad experience increases the development of intercultural sensitivity in undergraduate students and whether intercultural coursework combined with the study away experience has more impact than study abroad only. Supporting Hypothesis 1, the study confirmed prior research results that study abroad has a significant impact on intercultural development. Overall, the mean score for the 60 students who participated in this study increased from 93.83 to 102.74 (with a maximum possible score of 145) on the IDI instrument measuring intercultural sensitivity.

These results are consistent with those found by Rexeisen and Al-Khatib (2009), in which students who studied abroad had a pre-travel IDI score of 93.45 and a post-travel score of 103.48. This movement within the mid-range Minimization stage suggests the students' exposure to people from another culture helped them recognize and appreciate cultural differences in behavior and values. However, these means still fall more than 10 points below the 115 minimum required to move beyond Minimization to Acceptance. In contrast, when Anderson and Lawton (2011) examined pre- vs. post-travel IDI scores for students who had studied abroad, they found that students started (116.86) and ended (119.82) in the minimization stage, with much smaller gains overall. Further research would be needed to determine why these differences occurred.

Hypothesis 2, which predicted a greater increase in pre- to post-IDI scores when intercultural studies were combined with a study abroad, was not supported. Although the seven students who participated in the study abroad experience after taking intercultural coursework had a significantly higher pre-travel score (102.85 versus 92.61 for students who did not take intercultural coursework), the change scores for the study abroad only students were actually higher, with scores for these students rising by 9.45 points, from 92.61 to 102.06. In contrast, students with intercultural coursework only rose 5.07 points, from 102.85 to 107.92. Additionally, the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant. These findings of no significant difference, which contradicts the results of other studies, raises questions that will require further research to answer.

We accept that to resolve issues that hold people in the Minimization stage, students need to develop a deeper understanding of their own culture and of cultural frameworks for making

sense of cultural differences (Hammer, 2009). Intercultural coursework offers students opportunities to increase this cultural self-awareness. The two required intercultural courses for ICS students in this study, Introduction to Intercultural Studies and Intermediate Intercultural Studies, provide a foundation for a richer cultural immersion experience as students become better prepared for intercultural interactions. As noted, students who took ICS courses started off with pre-travel higher intercultural development scores (102.85 versus 92.61). It is likely that this difference can be attributed to a combination of greater knowledge and greater natural interest in cultural difference. Why, then, did these presumably more advanced and advantaged students not show the greater progress that was expected? Did the intercultural courses prepare them so well that they pre-empted some of the learning that would otherwise have taken place abroad? Given the much lower pre-travel scores for the study abroad only group (92.61), it is possible that the larger increase for that group is related to the starting point. Because they had much more to learn, they might have been more affected by the experience and therefore shown a greater increase in the IDI score. It is possible that the better prepared ICS students might have benefitted from a richer cultural immersion program, such as living in a host family's home or participating in a program where English is not spoken and would have shown greater gains after such experiences but those options were not available.

Limitations

An important limitation to this study is the number of participants (n=60) and, in particular, the very small sub-group of students (n=7) who took pre-travel intercultural studies classes. Clearly, the small sample size limits the ability to extrapolate these findings to a larger group. Moreover, not all members of the ICS group had the same amount of course work prior to studying abroad, a situation that is difficult to control. If a larger group could be recruited for a future study, this would not only strengthen the statistical analysis, it could offer the possibility of comparing scores for different levels of pre-travel intercultural course work. The overall number of study participants could be increased in the future if the IDI were administered to both short term and full term study abroad only students. During the time period of this study, completing the IDI was limited to those who studied away for a full term, even though the institution also offers a short term study abroad option. If IDIs had been administered to all these students, the sample size might have tripled to 180.

In addition, it was difficult to determine with available data to what extent students with 'study away only' experience had been exposed to other intercultural learning opportunities. Demographic data show that none of the participants were international students, however, some of the 53 students could have taken courses in subjects such as language, anthropology or history, for example. Subject matter covered in these type of courses could contribute to intercultural competence acquisition. Future studies can be designed to help control for these potential influences.

Implications

Despite these limitations, this study does offer additional evidence of the importance of intercultural competence-building knowledge in conjunction with an intercultural study abroad experience in order to maximize learning. As described earlier, students who participated in the study abroad experience after taking intercultural coursework had significantly higher pre-travel scores, suggesting they were better prepared before studying abroad. In the future, it would be beneficial to have a sample set of students who are asked to complete the Introduction to Intercultural Studies course (where the IDI can be administered) and a sample set of students who did not. In addition, a control group could be established of students who participate in Intercultural Studies coursework but who do not study abroad. This model could tell us more about how intercultural competence can be better developed in the classroom for those students who, for a variety of reasons, cannot participate in a study away experience. The effect of any acquisition of intercultural competence gained through non-study abroad experiences and courses other than Intercultural Studies courses is again something for further research.

Conclusions

In conclusion, regardless of how intercultural sensitivity is developed, it is clearly critical to a student's success. According to McTighe-Musil (2006), "The Association of American Colleges and Universities Greater Expectations Project reported that global knowledge and engagement, along with intercultural knowledge and competence, have been identified as essential learning outcomes for all fields of concentration and for all majors." (p.1) In addition, Cassiday (2005) found that effective leaders in her study were the ones who demonstrated intercultural competence. It seems that students will be at a disadvantage in today's global marketplace if they fail to develop intercultural cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills (Deardorff, 2009).

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About the Authors

Kathleen G. Rust, DBA, is the Chair of the Department of Intercultural Studies and an Associate Professor of Management at Elmhurst College, Elmhurst Illinois. Kathleen qualified to administer the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) in 2003 and has used the instrument to assess intercultural studies students' learning outcomes and in faculty development workshops. Kathleen has published articles in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Journal of Business and Psychology*, the *Journal of Education for Business*, the *Journal of Applied Business Research* and others. kathyrst@elmhurst.edu

Brenda Forster, PhD, is the originator of the Intercultural Studies Program and Professor of Sociology at Elmhurst College, Elmhurst, Illinois. Brenda qualified to administer the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) in 2002 and has administered it to students, faculty, and staff subsequently. Brenda has published four books and over 60 articles. brendaf@elmhurst.edu

Alice Niziolek, MA, is the Assistant Director of International Education and International Student Services at Elmhurst College, where she serves on the International Education Committee and teaches a credit-bearing course that prepares students for study abroad and re-entry. Alice qualified to administer the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) in 2007 and has administered it to student before and after their study abroad experience. She holds a BS in Business Administration and German and an MA in Teaching. She has been active in the field of international education for over 10 years, developing programming that addresses the intercultural adjustment needs of both study abroad and international students. alicen@elmhurst.edu

Christine M. Morris, MA, graduated from Berea College in 2010 with an BA in Psychology, and from Elmhurst College in 2012 with an MA in Industrial-Organizational Psychology. She is currently obtaining her Ph.D in Community and Behavioral Health at the University of Iowa, conducting research at the College of Public Health. Christine-morris@uiowa.edu