

## **The Impact of Study Abroad on College Students' Intercultural Competence and Personal Development**

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### **Abstract**

Today's interrelated and interconnected world demands that college students develop the intercultural competence to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In response to this challenge, the number of American students participating in study abroad has been increasing. Many studies have explored the benefits of studying abroad, yet there are few qualitative studies that investigated its impact on college students' intercultural competence and personal development. This qualitative study explores the impact of a semester-long study abroad on the development of intercultural competence and personal growth of 150 college students who have studied in different countries. Findings of this study shows that study abroad may enhance intercultural competence and personal development, reflected in the participants' personal essays on their living experience. They gained a better understanding of their own and other countries' culture and cultural differences, increased their level of self-confidence, global-mindedness, patience, assertiveness, maturity, self-awareness, flexibility and adaptability.

Keywords: intercultural competence; adaptability; study abroad; intercultural sensitivity; personal development; cross-cultural

With the growth of globalization and multinational corporations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, higher education institutions need to ascertain that students are developing the competencies to adjust to and remain competitive in the rapidly changing and highly competitive global marketplace. Leaders in international education recognize the transformative nature of study abroad programs in developing students who become interculturally sensitive and *intellectually* prepared to take their place in the world.

The most recent statistics from *Open Doors* indicates that the number of students participating in study abroad programs continues to grow as reflecting a 38 % increase from 205,988 in 2004-2005 to 329,339 in 2015-2016 (*Open Doors*, 2018). With this increase, it is crucial for stakeholders including students, administrators, faculty, and parents to find out interested whether a study abroad experience helps students to develop the skills needed for the global community and to succeed upon graduation. In the past, this belief was supported by Vande Berg (2001) pointing out that consumers were looking for warranties that their investment in education would develop the attitudes, knowledge, and skills for them to succeed upon graduation. Nowadays, educators and administrators in higher education are not only interested to know if an overall education is a fruitful expense but also if the investment in a study abroad program adds to skills needed for the competitive global market. Proponents of international

education and internationalization in higher education agree that the development of intercultural skills is crucial to the success of American students competing in the global workplace (Deardoff, 2006).

Higher education institutes recognize the need to assess the learning outcomes of students studying abroad. The American Institute for Foreign Study (AIFS) (2013) and other scholars stress the importance of exploring whether the students' investment reaps positive results, among which an enhancement students' abilities to recognize, understand and respect cultural differences and students' personal development. A number of studies which will be discussed in the literature review have investigated the impact of study abroad on students' change in attitudes, cross-cultural awareness, language acquisition, global-mindedness, personal development, and intellectual level (Tarrant, 2010; Engle & Engle, 2004; Kitsantas, 2004; Kitsandas & Meyers, 2002). Other studies have investigated how a study abroad experience makes a difference in students' intercultural communication, intercultural sensitivity and cross-cultural adaptability using a quantitative research method (Nguyen 2017; Scally, 2015; Rust, Forster, Morris & Niziolek, 2013; Stebleton, Siria & Cherney, 2013; Anderson & Lawron, 2011; Nguyen, Biderman, & McNary, 2010; Pedersen, 2010; Zarnick, 2010; Clarke, Flaherty, Wright & McMilen, 2009; Maharaja, 2009; Kehl, & Morris, 2008; Rexeisen, Anderson, Lawton & Hubbard, 2008; Williams, 2005; Engle & Engle, 2004, and Medina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004). Few studies on this topic have used a qualitative research method (King, Perez, & Shim, 2013 and Marx & Moss, 2011). However, there is a dearth of in-depth qualitative studies investigating the impact of a semester-long study abroad experience on the intercultural sensitivity and personal development simultaneously focusing on students' reflective self-reports on their experience. Vande Berg reinforced this fact by stating that there is a dearth of studies related to more in-depth studies in intercultural effectiveness (Vande, Berg, 2007).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of a semester-long study abroad program on the intercultural competence and personal development of students at a research-intensive university. For the purpose of this study, intercultural competence refers to the ability to develop an understanding of one's own and host culture, cultural differences, and one's own personal changes after a study abroad experience. This qualitative study is an extension of the researcher's doctoral dissertation, a quantitative study that investigated the impact of a semester long study abroad program on the intercultural sensitivity and cross-cultural adaptability skills of students at the same university. The results of pre and post quantitative study indicated that the study abroad experience had a positive impact on the participants' intercultural competence and personal development. The rationale behind this qualitative study is to supplement the quantitative results with in-depth and rich data from reflective self-reports of the same students on their intercultural competence and personal development using the same conceptual frameworks as the quantitative study. It aims at providing insight of how the students viewed their host and own culture, cultural differences and personal growth. Finally, the study also aims

at narrowing the gap between qualitative and quantitative research studies in this area of research.

### **Significance of the Study**

The statistical reports, *Open Doors* (2018), published by the Institute of International Education (IIE) indicate that study abroad participation has been growing steadily in the past ten years, reflecting a 52% increase from 205,988 in 2004-2005 to 313,415 in 2014-2015. Statistics in *Open Doors* (2018) reveal European countries were listed as the common study abroad locations with 55% of American students studying in Europe in 2014-2015 and about 34 % of undergraduates participated in a ‘semester abroad’ in 2014-2015. The same source lists the leading destinations in descending order of American undergraduates’ participation in 2016 as follow: United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, France, Germany, China, Ireland, Australia, Costa Rica, Japan, South Africa, and Mexico.

As the number of students participating in study abroad programs continue to grow in higher education, stakeholders including students, administrators, faculty and parents are interested to find out whether a study abroad experience helps students to develop the skills needed in a global community. The assessment of study abroad programs in any university or college will assist the administration in analyzing the effectiveness of their programs in terms of cost, quality and learning outcomes. The outcome-based approach of planning and implementing study abroad programs necessitates an evaluation of the learning experience. The increasing costs and the limited resources available to manage private and state-funded post-secondary academic institutions in the United States warrant the need for assessment to justify the existence of present and the implementation of future study abroad programs. Paige, Cohen and Shively (2004) support this argument by stating, “In an era of ever-greater accountability and cost-benefit analysis, hard evidence is being demanded to demonstrate that investments in various forms of education, including, study abroad, are worthy ones that are realizing their learning objectives.” (p. 53).

With the rise of students studying abroad, institutions in higher education have established goals and learning objectives for students studying abroad. Specific objectives for study abroad programs might vary from one higher education institution to another, yet profession and career development, personal growth and cultural understanding are common to most programs (AIFS, 2013). Consequently, assessment of whether those objectives are met is important for all stakeholders. To this effect, Vande Berg (2007) suggests that U.S. study abroad professionals should aim at designing programs that meet the students’ goals and expectations of their experience overseas.

The study seeks to provide administrators and educators in the field of international education with data that will help to evaluate the effectiveness of a semester-long island study abroad program on college students’ development of intercultural sensitivity and cross-cultural adaptability skills. It is hoped that this study will be of relevance to educators and administrators who are involved in the design, implementation, management and evaluation of study abroad programs. The literature reveals that the desired learning outcomes for college and university

students include an understanding of cultural differences and the development of intercultural skills to adapt to our global world. In order to comprehend how a study abroad experience contributes to the fulfillment of these outcomes, it is necessary to carry out more studies in that area. Finally, this study will contribute to a pool of research studies related of a study abroad experience on the cognitive, affective and behavioral development of college students.

### **Literature review**

The literature review will cover the following sections: the goals of study abroad, an explanation of the concept of intercultural competence and intercultural sensitivity focusing on an understanding of cultural differences, Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) as the conceptual framework for intercultural competence, Kelley & Meyer's Cross-cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI) as a construct for personal development, and finally an overview of selected research on the impact of study abroad on intercultural competence and personal development.

### **Goals of Study Abroad**

A study conducted by the American Institute for Foreign Study (AIFS) (2013) surveyed alumni who have studied abroad from 1990 to 2010 to find out about their learning goals and outcomes. They were summarized as follows: "impacted my knowledge of another culture (92%), developing skills and intercultural competencies which contributed to obtaining my first job after graduation (56%), and my ability to adapt in diverse workplace environments (80%)" (p. 6). Additionally, the alumni reported that the study abroad experience highly affected their "self-development and personal values". Those were "acceptance of difference in others, tolerance of ambiguity, self-awareness, confidence in new people, and greater independence and self-confidence (p. 13)". The results show that students have expected goals that they would like to achieve from their study abroad experience.

With the rise of students studying abroad, institutions in higher education have established goals and learning objectives for students studying abroad. Specific objectives for study abroad programs might vary from one higher education institution to another, yet academic, personal and intercultural competencies are common to most programs (Stier, 2003). Study abroad has been one of the strategies implemented by administrators of higher education for responding to the call for internationalization of higher education and for providing students with opportunities to acquire competence in facing diversity in our global world. Such competence would enable them to have an understanding of their own culture, as well as to develop an appreciation for the backgrounds, interests and points of view of others. Over the last two decades, there have been a number of a number attempts to investigate the goals of study abroad in higher education. The literature reveals that most research on desirable goals of study abroad focus on career development, better understanding of cultural differences, language learning, personal growth, global-mindedness, cross-cultural, and intercultural competence growth (Carlson, Burn, Useem, & Yachimowicz, 1990; Gillipsie, 2002 & Orahod, Kruze &

Pearson, 2004; Kehl & Morris, 2008; and Allen (2010). In addition, Dwyer (2004) has chartered the goals of study abroad as follows: academic, career development, intercultural development, personal and social growth.

The goals of study abroad change with time to meet the needs of institutions in higher education (Hoffa, 2010). Scholars view the experience as a stimulus to intellectual, perceptual understanding and personal growth. This approach of identifying the goals of study abroad is summarized by Hoffa (2010) as follows: “(1) creating a global outlook with other nations focusing on opportunities to develop global understanding, perspectives, and knowledge; (2) enhancing career preparation by learning cross-cultural and workplace skills needed in today’s global job market; and (3) fostering intellectual and personal development” (p. 13).

Other scholars have explored how a study abroad experience is an emotional, cultural and intellectual journey (Stier, 2003) in which the students embark on a cultural journey that becomes enriching through interaction with and reflection on cultural differences and peculiarities. Like Stier, Hopkins (1999) believed that students are given an opportunity to reflect on their assumptions of others and of self. Study abroad gives the students the opportunity to find themselves inwardly as well as outwardly and to reconcile their views of themselves and their assumptions with the new cultural environment, with the process of experiential learning leading to self-development.

Study abroad is one of the ways for students to develop or enhance empathy for other cultures and favorable attitudes towards other people. Knowledge about cultural differences, empathy for other cultures, the ability to have interactive coping skills and foreign language competency are becoming increasingly important (Lambert, 1994). Similar to Lambert, other scholars believe that the development of intercultural skills, including intercultural sensitivity, has become a significant goal of study abroad programs in higher education (Mahoney & Schamber, 2004).

The above literature suggests that the learning goals of study abroad could be summarized as intellectual and personal development, international understanding, and enhancement of global competence, cross-cultural skills and intercultural competence. This review does not suggest that other goals have not been identified by other scholars. For the purpose of this study, it is important to focus on how scholars have analyzed the goals of study abroad with respect to students’ changes in intercultural competence and personal development. The next section will cover a discussion of how scholars have interpreted these two concepts.

### **Intercultural Competence and Intercultural Sensitivity: An understanding of Cultural Differences**

Intercultural competence is defined under different terms in the literature review. For the purpose of this study, intercultural competence is referred to intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1993). A distinction between the terms intercultural competence and intercultural sensitivity is important. Intercultural competence refers to the external behaviors that an individual manifests when living in another culture, whereas intercultural sensitivity refers to the developmental process that dictates the degree of an individual’s cognitive ability to deal with cultural

differences (Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman, 2003). According to Hammer et. al. (2003), the level of intercultural competence increases with increasing degree of intercultural sensitivity. Furthermore, the term *intercultural sensitivity* also relates to the concept of intercultural communication competence because of the need for interaction to occur during the developmental process of intercultural sensitivity. To this effect, Bennett (1986) states that “the development of intercultural sensitivity demands attention to the subjective experience of the learner” (p. 179).

Scholars have interpreted the understanding of cultural differences through different contextual situations. Edward T. Hall (1976), often known as the father of the field, first published works that were related to intercultural communication and cross-cultural training. In his book *Beyond Culture* (1976), Hall shares his knowledge of how our experience is molded by culture. His analysis of the effects of space and time and other non-verbal behavior on human interaction led to further research in culture learning and the impact of such learning in training programs. The goals of these programs were to provide individuals with the skills to comprehend and respond appropriately to new situations and to gain a better understanding of cultural differences.

Understanding of cultural differences is also enhanced by the knowledge, skills and motivation needed to interact with other cultures. Appropriateness (appropriate behavior) and effectiveness in cross-cultural interactions are achieved when these three elements co-exist. In other words, the scholars agree that effectiveness of intercultural communication has to be viewed with a holistic approach combining the individual’s knowledge, skills and motivation (Wiseman, Hammer, & Nishida, 1989).

Adaptability skills are also important in the process of understanding cultural differences. Adaptability is viewed as the core of intercultural communication competence and as a determinant of how individuals will change their cultural ways and learn new ones (Kim, 2001). Kim adds that adaptability implies that individuals apply different skills and behaviors under challenging circumstances. Hence, an individual with effective intercultural skills has an understanding of cultural communication differences, the ability to deal with those challenges and the motivation to demonstrate those skills.

The development of intercultural sensitivity has also been analyzed by Chen and Starosta (1996) as an integral part of the process of building intercultural communication competence. They list the three components of the process of acquiring intercultural communication as intercultural sensitivity (affective), intercultural awareness (cognitive), and intercultural appropriateness (behavioral), including verbal and non-verbal skills. The authors argue that successful intercultural communication requires the interactants’ intercultural awareness by learning the similarities and differences, while the process of achieving awareness of cultural similarities and differences is enhanced by intercultural sensitivity.

Other scholars argue that an individual’s ability to function effectively in any cultural environment is directly related to his or her acknowledging and responding appropriately to the values of the people (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994). These scholars add that the awareness of culture

and an appreciation of cultural differences are possibly enhanced through cross-cultural training prior or during foreign travel to assist in people's adjustment to new cultures. Landis and Bhagat (1996) point out that an individual's sensitivity to cultural differences along with the ability to adapt to a new culture is becoming increasingly important in our global economy. Overseas assignments and frequent interactions among people of different cultures have necessitated the ability to adapt our behaviors appropriately to cultural differences.

The concept of intercultural sensitivity as described by Bennett (1993) is a developmental process during which individuals are emotionally involved in another culture and effectively interact with people of other cultures. Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (1993) is based on a continuum from *ethnocentrism*, which assumes that "the worldview of one's culture is central to all reality" (p.30) to *ethnorelativism*, which assumes that "cultures can only be understood relative to one another and that particular behavior can only be understood within a cultural context" (p.46). The scholar points out that the key to this development of intercultural sensitivity is the process along the continuum. The next section of the literature review covers the conceptual framework and construct that were used for this study.

#### **Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS): Conceptual Framework for Intercultural Competence**

For the purpose of this study, Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (1993) was used as a theoretical framework. According to this theory, an individual's development of intercultural sensitivity occurs through a process of understanding, constructing and experiencing cultural differences. Hence, this model was appropriately chosen to determine whether students would be developing an understanding of their own culture, of the host culture and of cultural differences during a semester-long study abroad experience.

The concepts of *ethnocentrism* and *ethnorelativism* are at the core of Bennett's DMIS (1993, 1986), refer to Table 1, below. The model is based on the assumption that each stage would be indicative of a particular cognitive structure and certain kinds of attitudes and behavior would typically be associated with each configuration of worldview (Hammer et. al., 2003, p. 13). Denial, Reversal and Minimization, the first three stages are on the ethnocentric end of the continuum with a worldview that 'one's culture is central to all reality' (Bennett, 1993, p.30). The last three stages, Acceptance, Adaptation and Integration are on the ethnorelative end with a worldview that 'cultures can only be understood relative to one another and particular behavior can only be understood within a cultural context' (Bennett, 1993, p. 46). Denial represents a worldview in which cultural difference is not an issue. Cultural difference is either not experienced at all, or it is experienced with a kind of undifferentiated attitude (Bennett, 1993). Defense is a stage when cultural difference is viewed as a threat to 'one's own sense of reality and thus to one's identity' (Bennett, 1993, p. 35). Defense is characterized by a position of 'cultural superiority' or of 'reversal' whereby an individual may consider the host culture superior to their own, while denigrating their own. The stage of Minimization emphasizes cultural similarities instead of differences between individuals from different cultures. An individual at the stage of Acceptance has more respect and acceptance for cultural difference.

An individual at the Adaptation stage adds new skills and attitudes to his or her worldview. The individual becomes more competent in his or her ability to communicate in other cultures and to act according to the rules dictated by them. Cultural empathy is a characteristic typical at that stage (Bennett, 1993). Finally, in the stage of integration, although rarely achieved, an individual has developed a multiple identity and does not belong to a particular cultural group.

Table 1  
*Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)*

The Ethnocentric Stages		
I. Denial	II. Defense	III. Minimization
A. Isolation	A. Denigration	Physical Universalism
B. Separation	B. Superiority	Transcendent Universalism
	C. Reversal	
The Ethnorelative Stages		
IV. Acceptance	V. Adaptation	VI. Integration
Respect for Behavioral Difference	A. Empathy	A. Contextual Evaluation
Respect for Value Difference	B. Pluralism	B. Constructive Marginality

*Source:* From *Towards ethnorelativism: A developmental model of Intercultural sensitivity* (Bennett, 1993).

It is important to point out Bennett’s DMIS was later changed to replace the “defense” stage by “polarization” and “integration” stage was eliminated to reflect stages of intercultural development from monocultural to intercultural mindset (Hammer, 2012), refer to Figure 1 below.

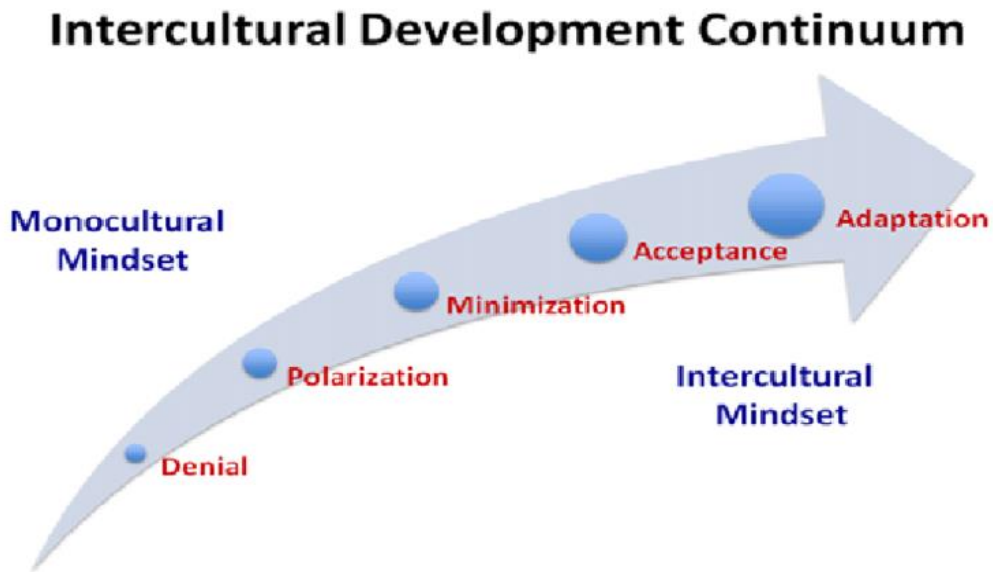
**Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI):  
Construct for Personal Development**

This study uses a construct by Kelly and Meyers’s Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI) (1995) as the framework to explore the impact of study abroad on the students’ personal development. The reliability and validity of this construct were supported by scholars who tested the inventory through a series of factor analysis and the Cronbach coefficient of internal consistency analysis (Nguyen, Biderman, & McNary, 2010 and Kraemer & Beckstead, 2003). The four dimensions of the CCAI construct are summarized below in Table 2.

Figure 1



*Intercultural Development Continuum*



Source: Hammer, M. (2012). The Intercultural Development Inventory: A new frontier in assessment and development of intercultural competence In M. Vande Berg, R.M. Paige, & K.H. Lou (Eds.), Student Learning Abroad (ch.5, pp.115-136).

Table 2

*Description of CCAI scales*

Emotional Resilience	Measures the ability to deal with stressful feelings in a constructive way along with a positive attitude.
Flexibility/Openness	Measures the ability to listen to others, to become acquainted with people of other cultures and to try to understand their worldview.
Perceptual Acuity	Measures the ability to perceptually be attentive to verbal and non-verbal cues and the ability to communicate interpersonally.
Personal Autonomy	Measures the ability to deal with cultural conflict independently and successfully and to be self-directed.

In summary, individuals, who possess flexibility and openness lack rigidity, are nonjudgmental, enjoy diversity and feel comfortable with people of other cultures. Individuals who are perceptually acute are attentive to verbal and nonverbal cues, interpersonal relations, and communication styles. Such individuals are also empathetic, adaptable and able to shift their

cultural worldview. Autonomous individuals have a strong sense of identity and can deal with cultural conflicts successfully. They are self-directed, have clear personal values, and respect themselves and others. In addition, they tend to set up their goals and make their own decisions (Kelley & Meyers, 1995). The next section will cover few research studies that have used the DMIS conceptual framework, CCAI construct and others to explore the impact of study abroad to assess intercultural competence and personal development.

### **Overview of the impact of study abroad on intercultural competence, intercultural sensitivity and personal development**

This section of the literature review reveals that so far very few studies have investigated both the intercultural competence and personal development in a qualitative study. Several studies have used the DMIS conceptual framework and the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) based on that framework to explore the impact of study abroad on students' intercultural competence. A summary of those studies and other studies that have used others instruments to explore the same topic follows.

The results a pre and post- test quantitative study show statistically significant increase in the IDI scores after the study abroad experience indicating a positive development in intercultural competence experience (Rust, Forster & Niziolek, 2013). The findings of qualitative using the DMIS framework revealed that participation of students in a teacher education program abroad increased intercultural development (Marx & Moss, 2011). Another quantitative study by Pedersen (2010) compared the pre and post scores of the IDI for three groups of students and revealed that the group who was involved in activities for developing intercultural competence showed a statistically significant difference in the post scores compared to the second group not involved in the activities and the third who stayed home. Similarly, another quantitative study using the Global Perspective Inventory (GPI) and IDI investigated students' intercultural development during abroad study as compared to campus. The post-test results of students in a study abroad program showed greater gains in intercultural development than their on-campus counterparts on both instruments (Anderson, P. H & Lawton, L., 2011).

Findings from a quantitative study using the DMIS framework and IDI revealed that the students studying abroad acquire greater intercultural proficiency, more openness to cultural diversity and higher level of global mindedness than students who did not. The students perceived themselves as being more open to intercultural communication and more approachable after the experience, suggesting personal growth (Clarke, Flaherty, Wright & McMillen, 2009). Another pre and post quantitative study with a control group using the IDI and CCAI instruments revealed that the positive change in intercultural sensitivity and cross-cultural adaptability skills of students studying in an "island" type study abroad program compared to the group who did not (Maharaja, 2009). The results of another pre and post quantitative longitudinal study on study abroad and intercultural development by Rexeisen, Anderson, Lawton & Hubbard (2008) did not indicate conclusive findings that study abroad resulted in a long-term significant overall increase in intercultural competence.

Patterson (2006) explored the impact of a short-term program on intercultural sensitivity of students who studied abroad and those who did not. The results indicated an increase in the pre and post data analysis. Another pre and post-test quantitative study by Williams (2005) explored the impact of study abroad on the cross-cultural adaptability and intercultural sensitivity of study using the CCAI construct and concluded that students who studied abroad had a higher level of cross-cultural adaptability skills at the beginning and end of the experience compared to those who did not study abroad. Another study by Engle and Engle (2004) investigated impact of the duration of a study abroad program using the DMIS conceptual framework and IDI instrument and concluded that students in a year-long program enhances their intercultural competence as compared to students who participated a semester-long study abroad program. The findings of another mixed method study using the same conceptual framework and instrument revealed that the intercultural sensitivity development level was higher for students in a 16-week- program as compared to a seven-week one (Mendez-Lopez-Portillo, 2004).

The results of a quantitative study using the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES) on the impact of short-term study abroad programs associated with intentional programmatic structures demonstrated significant effects on students' overall intercultural competence. It supported the need for well-defined activities during the stay overseas (Nguyen, 2017). Another scholar examined the validity of the development of intercultural competencies of students participating in a three different language programs in Spain: direct enrollment abroad, American Centers and third-party enrollment. . This mixed research study conducted pre and post-tests employing Freed's (2004) Language Contact Profile and post one-one one interviews. This exploration suggested that the direct enrollment in a Spanish university offer students a more complete and life changing experience in their intercultural competence (Scally, 2015). Another quantitative study explored the impact of international travel activities, namely service learning, cross-cultural experiences, and internship broad on college students' global and intercultural competencies for five different programs using the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey at the Center for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California. Overall, the study showed significant development in those competencies after the experience (Stebbleton, A.; Soria, K. & Cherney, B., 2013). Zarnick (2013) conducted a quantitative pre and post-test study on short-term study abroad of one week on the development of intercultural sensitivity. The analysis of the data collected from the Intercultural Sensitivity Index (ISI) instrument showed minimal change in that area and concluded that duration of study abroad is a limitation. Another quantitative study explored the effect of a short-term and semester-long study abroad on students' global-mindedness using the Global-Mindedness Scale. Statistically significant differences were found indicating that the global-mindedness scores of students who completed a semester-long program were higher than those who completed a short-term study abroad program and those who plan to study abroad.

A mixed research study on how college students experience intercultural learning through different approaches and features indicated that participation in study abroad experience and engaging in personal reflection enhance intercultural learning (King, P.M., Perez, R. J & Shim,

W., 2013). Finally, the findings of another mixed approach research using the DMIS framework for the qualitative analysis and IDI instrument for collecting statistical data reveal that the teacher education study abroad program enhanced intercultural development. In conclusion, the summary of the different quantitative and mixed approach research supports the argument that study abroad experience positively affects intercultural competence and personal growth.

### **Methodology**

The study under discussion was undertaken to explore and describe changes in a group of 150 male and female junior and senior undergraduates who attended a research-intensive university and participated in a semester-long (14-16 weeks) study abroad program in both English (60%) and non-English speaking countries (40%). The countries in descending order of attendance are United Kingdom, Australia, Ireland, Spain, Austria, France, Greece, Mexico, Chile, Vienna, Argentina, China, Costa Rica, India, Japan, Thailand, Russia, Belgium, and Germany. Participants were enrolled in different schools and disciplines within the university. This qualitative study utilized a research design that included the lived experiences of college students who have participated in a semester long study abroad. Creswell (2012) states that methods of data collection within a phenomenological study can include interviews, focus groups, and written or oral self-reports of participants' experience. As Creswell (2014) points out the phenomenological research design allows for in-depth data collection from either written or oral narration of experiences. For the purpose of this study, the researcher collected essays written by students upon their return back to campus after a semester long study abroad from different countries around the world. The essays addressed the following four questions related to their experience in the host country:

#### **Research Questions**

- How has studying abroad affected your perceptions of your native culture?
- How has studying abroad affected your views about the host culture?
- How has studying abroad affected your thoughts about cultural differences?
- How has studying abroad affected your personal development?

#### **Data Collection**

Documental essays completed by students after their return to the home campus were used to collect data. Those documents were experiential description of students' stay in a host country. Participants responded to the above questions designed to elicit how their study abroad experience helped them to gain an understanding of their own culture, the host culture, and cultural differences as well as how their experience affected their personal development.

#### **Data Analysis**

A content analysis was completed to collect pronounced themes from students' responses to the above questions. The analysis consisted of a matrix system of recording each student's responses to the four questions. The deductive data were read several times, the relevance of the data to the questions were identified, and the words, phrases; paragraphs were coded to into

multiple themes and categories. The coding and analysis were related to the six stages of Bennett’s DMIS and Kelly and Meyers’s Cross-Cultural Adaptability four skills construct. Data were also analyzed through an inductive process uncovering emergent patterns of students’ understanding of cultural differences and changes in personal development. Those were also coded and recorded in a matrix system. The purpose of the analysis was not to focus on each student’s individual development of intercultural sensitivity and personal development, but to describe how the group responses were supported by the conceptual framework and construct of the study.

### Results and Discussion

The prominent theme that emerged from the data is that study abroad has an impact on students in acquiring a better understanding of one’s own and another culture and gaining a better appreciation of cultural differences. The majority of the students described how their views of themselves changed through the lived experience in a different culture. The results are reported and discussed in light of the four main aspects of their experience that the students wrote about in their essay. The following table is a summary of the main themes derived from the data analysis for each question.

Table 3  
*Summary of Results*

Question	Percentage Answered	Theme Areas
How has studying abroad affected your perceptions of your native culture?	Out of 150 responses, 71% directly addressed the question.	Critical view of own culture (“Defense” stage of DMIS) Appreciative understanding of host culture Understanding of Host views of American culture
How has studying abroad affected your views about the host culture?	Out of 150 responses, 80% directly addressed the question.	Awareness in behavioral, value, external factors and differences Host culture similar to own culture (“Minimization” stage of DMIS) Perception of Value; Host country being ‘family oriented’ vs consumerism
How has studying abroad affected your thoughts about cultural differences?	Out of 150 responses, 80% of the students directly addressed the question	Strong acknowledgement of cultural differences Improved empathy, greater appreciation and respect for other of host culture Better understanding and Acceptance of differences (“Acceptance” stage of DMIS) Open-mindedness; change in world view and better appreciation of own culture

<p>How has studying abroad affected your personal development?</p>	<p>Out of 150 responses, 98% of the students directly addressed</p>	<p>Personal growth                      -65% felt feelings of increased independency; maturity; flexibility, perseverance, assertiveness (CCAI skills construct)                      -58% developing a higher sense of one's self                      -72 % open-mindedness about cultural differences                      62% - Attention to verbal and non-verbal communication clues and styles</p>
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### Perceptions of Native Culture

One of the dimensions described by Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (1993) is learning about one's own culture. Out of 150 responses, 71 % directly addressed the question of how study abroad affected the way they see their own culture. The data shows that the majority of the students developed new perceptions of their native culture after their study abroad experience. These perceptions included students' critical views of their own culture, descriptions of host culture views about American culture and better appreciation of their own culture.

Some students have expressed how studying abroad have become more critical of their own culture. One student reported:

*'Studying abroad has negatively affected my view of America and has opened my eyes to the way that other countries view the United States. I feel as though that the United States is such a fast-paced country, placing much emphasis on convenience and materialism. I have never realized how much petty drama America drives on, with all the reality – TV and celebrities, and materialistic images.'*

Similarly, another student noted:

*'I got a totally new view of American culture. Americans are not exactly looked on favorably throughout the rest of the world, from what I've learned from foreigners. The worst part of my entire trip was returning home, not because of my time abroad was over, but because of the way I was treated by people at the Los Angeles airport. They were rude, and I was accustomed to being helped out when I needed.'*

These views support Bennett's DMIS Model's ethnocentric stage, in particular the "Defense" phase when an individual may consider the host culture superior to their own, while denigrating their own. Several students from Australia and England expressed their view of how the host culture was much better than their own in terms of personal characteristics of Americans and materialistic consumption. One student wrote

*'I found Americans to be less friendly, more rushed and more uptight in mannerism. I like the Australian's way of life much better.'*

The data reveal that many students became aware of how other cultures have stereotype views of the American culture and do not want to live like people in America. The stereotypical idea of an American by other cultures was described through words as 'rich', 'spoiled', 'arrogant', and 'superior', 'uncaring' and 'selfish'. A student reflected:

*'I got a totally new view of American culture. Americans are not exactly looked on favorably throughout the rest of the world, from what I have learned from foreigners. We are looked at as loud and arrogant, and in ways some of us are. I've learned that people in other countries believe that all Americans think we are better than everyone else is. By forcing myself to come in contact with a culture I wasn't accustomed to, I have come to accept cultural differences; some cultures don't want to live as we do.'*

Relatively fewer students expressed a better appreciation of their own culture as compared to a more critical view of their own culture. Most of those students studied in Spain, Mexico and Argentina. One student noted, *'after being in Argentina for a semester, I now appreciate my own country even more, despite all of the problems that exist.'* Still another student wrote, *'I am much more appreciative of the American culture and all that we are offered after I experienced life in Russia.'*

In summary, students' views changed while they were abroad expressing either a more critical view or a better appreciation of their native culture. It seems that students who returned from English-speaking countries became more critical in their analysis whereas students who returned from non-English speaking countries became more nationalistic.

### **Perceptions of Host Culture**

Of the total number of responses, 80% directly answered the question of how study abroad affected the way they view the host culture. They described how they have changed their perceptions and gained insights about the host culture and its people. Most students related their view of differences on behavioral, value and external factors. The majority of the students expressed the feeling that people of the host culture were much more 'easy going', 'relaxed', 'friendlier', 'happy-go-lucky', 'nicer', 'laid-back', 'affectionate' and 'simpler' than the people in the United States. Many students reported how they believe other cultures are more family-oriented compared to American culture. Others noted that Americans are 'workaholics' in pursuit of 'materialistic consumption.' Referring to external differences, one student who came back from Australia pointed at how, *'there's less noise, less busy cities and less attention given to the non-essentials of the world'*. Many responses were supported by Bennett's DMIS stage of Defense characterized by reversal whereby students consider the host culture better than their own. One student noted:

*'Australians care about the people surrounding them. If you request information in any restaurant, any store, any public place, people with smiling faces are willing to help you. No one is pushy or trying to rush you through your day. The attitude is very pleasant. We could definitely take some lessons from the Australians!'*

Many students described how their stereotype views of the host culture were replaced by different ones. These responses reflect a movement from an ethnocentric stage of minimization to an ethnorelative stage of Acceptance and Adaptation. Those students recognized their stereotype views and constructed a different worldview. One student wrote:

*'I went to Calcutta expecting to find a hellhole of human suffering and agony, but what I found instead were a whole lot of people just like the people I might find anywhere else. Many were less fortunate than people anywhere else, but that didn't make them a different kind of people; that just made them less fortunate. There wasn't a class of 'sufferers' as I half expected there to be, there were just people going about their business and doing what they had to do in order to survive. I'm ashamed to admit but I think I went to India with a romanticized idea about poverty-equating poverty with the nobility of suffering-only to discover how ridiculous my own thinking was.'*

Still another student pointed out, *'I had a stereotype view of British people as being snobbish and racist. I now find them as incredibly diverse and void of racism'*. Referring to the same idea, another student observed, *'As far as people are concerned my preconceived notions are far from reality. I perceived Londoners to be very snobbish, unfriendly and cold. Truthfully they are friendly, down-to-earth, warm hearted people.'* Few students who studied abroad in Ireland expressed how their preconceived views of Irish people changed from originally casting them as being all 'red headed' and 'individualistic' to being 'diverse' and 'far from individualistic.'

It is worth noting that the same students who answered the previous question about how they perceive their native culture responded to how they perceive the host culture. The answers to both questions by the same students may reflect the DMIS stage of "minimization". This stage emphasizes cultural similarities instead of differences between individuals from different cultures.

### **Perceptions of Cultural Differences**

The data reveal that 80% of the students directly addressed the question of how study abroad affected the way that they think about cultural differences. While comparing the responses to the DMIS, the majority of the students was beyond the stage of Denial and acknowledged the existence and importance of cultural differences. Many students expressed feelings that the study abroad experience gained a better appreciation of, a greater respect for and acceptance of cultural differences. The responses illustrated developmental growth in intercultural sensitivity from a stage of Minimization to that of Acceptance revealing an interest in to engage in conversation with people of the host culture, to learn about different ways of life,



and to understand a new perspective. Students developed empathy by challenging their beliefs about other people and putting themselves in the shoes of their host. One student related her experience about cultural differences as follows:

*‘Although it is easy to look at another culture and disapprove, really the correct way is to understand the differences based on the host culture and see how it compliments. We can only judge other countries norms in relation to other overall culture. There really is not one ‘true’ way of doing things and one person’s own personal views cannot really change another cultures so really the only thing to do is accept the differences and adapt as best as possible.’*

Another student noted *‘each new entity opened my mind greatly and changed my perspective on the world around me and the people who inhabit it. Previously, I had a very ethnocentric point of view and I eventually accepted differences as a change of pace.’* Other students reflected on how their acceptance of cultural differences developed a better appreciation of your own and other cultures.

Although most of the students identified differences rather than similarities among people and recognize that differences are necessary and positive, several students were at a stage of Minimization on the DMIS and *‘bury difference under the weight of cultural similarities’* (Bennett, 1993, p. 41) and identified more similarities than differences. One student shared their views of similarities by noting, *‘while a number of qualities ‘typical’ of an American could be considered negative, offensive, or rude, I have learned that such qualities exist in all people hailing from all countries’* and another reflected *‘people are still very similar in their basic desires, at least that is how it seems to me now.’*

In summary, the majority of the students have stated in some form or the other that they have a better appreciation for cultural differences and have learned to respect other cultures. They have also learned that in spite of the fact that people from different cultures have unique customs, values, rituals and communication styles, people around the world share common traits.

### **Personal Development: View of Oneself**

The data indicate that 98% of the students directly addressed the question of how studying abroad affected the way they see themselves. The deductive method of comparing data to Kelly and Meyers’s Cross-Cultural Adaptability Skill sets supported the findings that students developed personal autonomy, emotional resilience, flexibility/openness and perceptual ability. Personal autonomy and emotional resilience are characteristics most commonly identified in the responses.

The analysis reveals that about 65% of the students expressed their feelings about becoming more independent as a result of their experience. One student described:

*‘I became more independent when I realized that other than my roommate I knew no one and I could not always rely on her to hold my hand through everything. I found myself taking public buses alone to the places I needed to go to, and organizing a trip to go skydiving even when I was with people I hardly knew. I*

*truly stood on my own two feet for the first time in my life and I was not scared to do so.'*

Still another student noted, *'After my travels this summer, I have a new found feeling of independence. I see myself as more confident now and more independent – it is almost a sense of invincibility as I am ready to take on challenges and face new experiences, no matter what they may be'*. Another student was differently explicit about his development of independence and stated, *'the perfect example of my independence is finally I broke down and cleaned my bathroom for the first time.'* Others related their independence as successfully dealing with finance, air tickets, and transportation, making their own choices, traveling on their own and so on.

Scholars often suggest that the opportunity to study abroad develops increased confidence in students (Kelley and Meyer's, 1995; Cushner and Karim, 2004). This argument was supported by the data showing that about 58% of students reported that they gained or developed a higher level of self-confidence. One student wrote, *'I have gained confidence simply by living on my own for five months in a new environment surrounded by a language in which I was not fluent.'* Similarly, another student remarked:

*'I went to England completely and utterly scared to death. I didn't know what to expect and I was counting the days until I could return in June. I have never been good with being away from home. Yes, I was spoiled. I could hardly imagine being anywhere without being able to see my parents for a few months. I gradually started to rely on myself rather than my mom and dad. Once I saw that I could survive I felt confident.'*

Many students who studied in non-English speaking countries reported that they built upon their confidence by being in a country of a different language and *'had to learn how to live, eat, study and work in a different country.'* One student reflected, *'in my case, residing in Chile brought about a personal awareness and positive change from within. The initial difficulty experienced with the language developed in me a stronger sense of confidence and motivation.'* The analysis of the essays suggests that 72 % of the students express their thoughts about being more open-mindedness from the experience. One student wrote, *'study abroad has helped me to be very independent and open-minded... I have learned how to open myself and become close with people.'* Another trait that was commonly identified along with openness was flexibility and adaptability. Many students believed that they have become more adaptable because they were able to deal with uncertainties, culture shock, discomforts and personal anxieties. To this effect, one student wrote, *'living in a foreign country without all of the comforts and amenities of home made me more adaptable and independent'*. Another noted, *"I am more flexible about entertaining skeptical ideas, whereas I would have previously disposed of those without much contemplation."*

It is worth mentioning that 62% of the student's responses related on how they learned to "live in unfamiliar surroundings", "comfortable to be the different one out of the group", "overcome their fear of communicating in a foreign language" and pay attention to "verbal and

non-verbal communication styles". These responses may refer to perceptual acuity, one of Kelley and Meyers's cross-cultural adaptability skills and to the DMIS's stage of Acceptance and Adaptation. These responses may also suggest that the students' intercultural communication skills were enhanced while abroad.

Finally, the inductive analysis of changes in personal development reveals that many students reported learning new things about themselves, consequently, adding a different perspective to their lives. They described the changes using words as: 'perseverance', 'transformative', 'self-sufficient', 'maturity', 'calm', 'relaxed', 'patient', 'risk-taking', 'spontaneous', 'assertiveness', 'self-awareness', and 'global-minded'. This analysis is supported by scholars who suggest personal development is a process involving personal growth, maturity, evolution and expansion of oneself (Kelley and Meyers, 1995; Kauffman & al, 1992; Hopkins, 1999). To summarize his or her study abroad experience, change in worldview and change in oneself, a student wrote:

*'To sum my study abroad experience, it has really helped me to see myself as part of a much greater and more significant whole. Problems can be solved simply by seeing the bigger picture; it's all about perspective. I can read about this in my psychology textbooks all I want, but to see it and experience it first-hand been one of the most transformative experiences of my life.'*

Overall, the data provided rich information focusing on Bennett's Model of Intercultural Sensitivity Development (DMIS) and Kelley and Meyer's construct of Cross-cultural Adaptability Skills (CCAI). The common themes that were derived from the students' essay may suggest that the majority of the students developed a better appreciation and understanding of their own and host culture after a semester-long studying abroad. They also suggest that the students developed transformative skills such as cultural adjustment, open-mindedness, flexibility, personal autonomy, perceptual acuity, perseverance, and independence. The data has changed the participants understanding of their own and host culture as well as cultural differences. Furthermore, students reported the change in their personal development and learned more traits about themselves through their experience.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Research limitations should be considered in the interpretation and generalization of the data. The results may not be generalized to other institutions with different student populations. The research design did not include a control group that consequently could not minimize the threats of internal validity.

Another limitation of this study is the dependence on students' self-reported analysis of their experience, known as indirect as opposed to direct assessment measure. To this effect, Creswell (2014) points out that phenomenological research approach has its limitation on how data is being collected and analyzed.

The data represented students' perceptions of their native culture, host culture, cultural differences and themselves after their study abroad experience. A pre- and post-study would have provided valuable information that would have enhanced our understanding of the degree of their enhancement of intercultural competence and personal development. Finally, a longitude investigation on the impact of study abroad on the participants would provide an insight on how students internalized their intercultural learning several months after their return. Those limitations may be considered as implications for future research.

### Conclusion

In summary, the findings of the study suggest that a study abroad experience has a positive impact on students' their intercultural competence and personal development. They concur with the results and provide more in-depth data to support the results of the quantitative study conducted by the researcher on that topic using the same DMIS conceptual framework and CCAI construct. Developing intercultural competence is a necessity in this global community where it is imperative to gain respect for, knowledge of and understanding of other cultures. From educators' and educational leaders' standpoint, this study is useful in their decision-making about the importance of international education. The results imply that efforts to support semester-long study abroad programs should continue.

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